

heart of glass, mind of stone by pleasedonotmicrowaveme

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield Bonding, Billy Hargrove Lives, Billy Hargrove Needs a Hug, Billy Hargrove Redemption, Billy Hargrove Tries to Be a Better Person, Billy Hargrove Tries to Be a Better Sibling, Bisexual Steve Harrington, Daddy Issues, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Gay Billy Hargrove, Good Parent Jim "Chief" Hopper, Implied/Referenced Domestic Violence, M/M, Slow Burn, Smart Billy Hargrove, Steve Harrington Has Bad Parents, Susan Hargrove is Out Of The Picture

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sometimes, getting hit in the head by a basketball may be a blessing in disguise

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

This is for Yara, who came up with this great prompt. Hope it's a good case of the Thanks-I-Hate-Its!

It wasn't Steve's fault. It wasn't really Billy's fault either. Granted, the blond might have wanted to think before he acted, but that was a detail. It was actually Tommy who started the whole thing. He'd miscalculated a throw and accidentally landed a basketball onto Billy's head. Billy, not thinking everything through very well, had immediately decided that it was Steve who threw the ball. Who else would it have been, after all? Steve had been on his ass from the moment he walked into school, pestering Billy at any chance he'd gotten. And so, Billy decided it was time that Steve got what he had coming, and he took a swing at him. One small brawl, a yelling match and a quick shower later, both boys were sitting in the hallway next to the principal's office under the watchful eyes of their coach.

Both boys were dreading the arrival of their fathers, who had been called in to come watch their sons get scolded and then take them home to get scolded some more. The clock that was ticking right above the door to the office was sounding more deafeningly loud by the second, and although it had been there the whole time, neither of the boys were entirely sure how much time had passed since they'd sat down. They both stared straight ahead of them, waiting in a tense silence to see whose father would arrive first. Steve had anticipated that his dad would be late. It was his dad, after all: it was not like he really cared about anything Steve was up to. It was a small miracle that he was even in the country when this happened. Steve wasn't sure how to feel about it. But as time went by, he started wondering about Billy. He knew from Max that they didn't live too far out of town, and as far as Steve knew, Billy's father might be either jobless or have a job that he could come home from easily. Max had mentioned that Neil was almost always home when they were home from school. Surely, his father must be turning up soon? What could be keeping him away for so long? Max only lived a ten minute drive

away from school, and Steve must have been sitting on this hard as shit bench for at least 40 minutes by now. The clock slowly ticked on, and eventually the silence was broken by a door opening and falling closed again and a pair of shoes walking down the hall. A man walked into Steve's view. It was his father. He wordlessly jerked his head towards the office doors and Steve stood up to follow his father into the office.

Billy's father didn't arrive until Steve was done getting his talking-to. As he left the principal's office, he looked at Billy, who kept his head down. He stared after him as the other boy seemed to have to drag himself into the office after his father. The guy looked stern. Steve remembered Max telling him something about her step-dad being strict, but not much more than that. He wondered how Billy's father would handle this. If he felt the same obvious disappointment towards his son that Steve's father obviously felt towards him. If he would ignore his son for the next few days like Steve knew his father would, not that it would have been different if he hadn't gotten into trouble anyway. He heard his father tell him to grab his jacket, and he moved away from the office to do so. *You're disappointing me, boy. Embarrassing, even. How come you can't just man up and walk away from a situation like that? You're being childish. You should have known better, this is idiotic. I don't have time for this.* He grabbed the jacket off the hook and put it on as he watched his father walk ahead to the car. Steve needed a moment to get himself together, to make sure that he wouldn't have to push back tears of anger in the car. His father got onto his nerves in a way that even Billy couldn't. If only he could just get his own place already. Before Steve walked out of the building to join his dad in the car, he decided to stop by the principal's office a last time. If there was anything that would make this day at least a little better, it would be if Billy was at least not staring through the window and laughing on the inside at how much Steve's father sucked. Steve had an idea that that's what he would be doing: the principal was sat with his back towards the window, so anyone visiting could look out into the hallway and watch the show. If there ever was a time for Billy to enjoy seeing Steve suffer, it would be now.

However, just as Steve went to walk to the office windows, the door to the office opened which made Steve jump away, further into the hallway. He wanted to avoid being seen here alone now, for some

reason. He wasn't sure why. The principal came out of the room, Steve noticed from the corner of his eyes. He followed him with his eyes for a while, and he came to the conclusion that the man just stepped out to go get some water for a second. It meant that Billy would still be in there. Steve wanted to be quick, as he was not keen on the principal getting on his case again or his father getting impatient, so he turned around on his heel and took two steps to his left to peek into the office. He decided that he would just blatantly look in, in case Billy was looking out. He didn't want to look like he was sneakily spying.

Inside the office, Billy and his father were sitting quietly. Billy was looking forward, but he did not seem to be registering anything that was happening before him. He didn't notice Steve, anyway, which was good because it meant that maybe, just maybe, he hadn't just been sitting here watching Steve get chewed out by his dad. It was a bit of a relief to Steve. He was just about to walk away when Billy's father suddenly stood up. It was a movement full of resolution, as if he had thought it through very meticulously and this was the exact thing that needed to be done. Billy followed suit mindlessly and Steve stayed to watch what would happen. This looked strange; they didn't seem like they were about to walk out of the office. Billy had turned towards his father. Nick, was that his name? Neil? Something like that. Max had mentioned him once or twice. Steve usually stopped listening when the conversation came to Billy. Outside, a car started honking. Steve looked around to see that it was his father, motioning at him to hurry up already. Of course, he had been in full sight of his dad. He was startled by a loud slapping sound that came from the office, and turned back around to see what had happened. Billy stumbled and leaned into a chair, which he held onto to keep himself upright. Neil raised a hand at him, on the side of his face that wasn't red already. Outside, Steve's father pressed his car horn and did not let go anymore.

As Steve turned away to run to the car, he heard Billy get hit again. He quickly clamped his hands over his ears. He wasn't sure if he could handle hearing that sound again.

2. Chapter 2

Steve's father left him alone soon enough. He had to get back to work, and so Steve was stuck inside the house on his own once again. It gave him some time to rethink everything that happened that day. Really, he was just trying to watch TV while eating a sandwich, but the sound of Billy getting hit by his father kept replaying in his brain. Steve tried turning the TV up, but it didn't help. He zoned out and watched everything on the basketball court happen in front of him again. Tommy telling him that he learned a new cool trick shot. Steve being not all too impressed by it, but still encouraging Tommy to show him. Tommy throwing the ball and hitting Billy right on top of the head with it. And before he knew it, Steve had been whacked onto the ground.

He and Billy had never really gotten along well, ever since Billy got into town he had just been mean and aggressive. Steve saw some similarities between him and Max: she was quite feisty as well, and not afraid to get into a yelling match with anyone. So there must be something connecting their behaviour, Steve figured, because they're not related. Steve had wondered about it often: how such a small and kind girl like Max could suddenly turn into the biggest, most intimidating person out of the whole gang of kids he had somehow befriended. And now he knew. Or at least, he thought he did. He didn't really know if Max received the same treatment from her stepfather as Billy, but he figured that even if she didn't, it must be affecting her one way or another. It can't be good for a person to live in a household like that. Not even for a day. Steve figured that he'd rather stay the way he was now than take Max or Billy's spot if he had to choose. He made a mental note to himself to make sure to check up on Max often from now on. In the case that things got very bad, he could at least try to get her out of there. Though he would have to deal with Billy to get that done, probably.

Billy drove home from school on his own that afternoon. He was grateful to be driving home alone. He didn't even have to pick Max up from the arcade, she was at El's today. Hopper promised to drop her off at the house at five, so Max wouldn't be home for another two hours. Maybe that was a good thing today, Billy figured. At least she wouldn't have to witness what was about to happen.

Billy drove safely, stopping at every red or even yellow light, letting kids on bikes cross the street and taking turns slowly. Sometimes he enjoyed driving like this. He was known for his reckless driving, but when he paid attention to everyone around him on the road and did his best to make sure that they all got home safe and happy, it gave him the feeling of still having a little bit of control left over his life. He knew what Neil was up to right now. He would be at the house already, maybe having some coffee while waiting for Billy to arrive. No, scrap that, he'd be having a beer. And when Billy would arrive, he would crush the can in his fist and stand up to greet him when he walked in. Billy knew what to do. Look at him. Address him as sir, always speak with at least two words. Don't cry. That was the most important one to Billy. *Don't cry*. Crying was reserved for when he finally made it to his room. Just two very quiet sobs into his pillow at most, then man up again. Billy turned his steering wheel, directing the blue car into the driveway of the house. Neil was already looking out at him through the window. Showtime.

Hours later and the night had fallen around Steve's house. It was a small miracle that he hadn't worn a track into the floor from the continuous pacing that he had been doing. He had been so stuck in his head over the whole Billy-And-Max-Maybe-Being-In-Danger thing that he hadn't noticed the darkness outside closing in on him. Usually by the first sign of sunset, Steve closed all the curtains and turned every light he could find on. He hated the dark. And sure, he'd gotten into trouble with his father over the electricity bill once or twice, but he preferred that over having to look at the dark forest that was edging his garden. Ever since the whole demogorgon situation, it seemed to loom over the house rather than protect it. Eventually the thing that snapped Steve out of his thoughts and back to earth was the phone ringing. Steve froze on the spot and looked up and around him. Sure, the phone was ringing, but the curtains were also still open, he noticed. There was nothing he could do until he'd closed them and turned on the lights. He just had to. His heart was already jumping out of his chest from the moment he looked up to be met with darkness. And so, Steve ignored the phone and started on the curtains. He figured he'd answer the call later. Too bad his house had so many windows, though, because the phone stopped ringing when he was a little over halfway done closing the curtains downstairs. *If it's important, they'll call again*. He made sure to hurry. Running from

window to window and up the stairs, he knew exactly where he had to go to get all the windows in one go. This was the quickest route. He turned on all the lamps in the rooms he was in immediately, so he didn't have to run through the house twice. The phone started ringing again downstairs when Steve was working on the bathroom lights. It was an awful sound, especially in this situation. He hated it, he *hated* it, it sounded threatening. He still didn't answer the phone. The attic had to be done first. Then, he could go down to see who was calling. While he was sprinting up the last set of stairs, the phone quieted down again. He closed his eyes while he was working in the attic. Of all things, the attic scared him the most. Downstairs, the phone rang again. *Third time's the charm*, Steve thought, and lucky for whoever was trying to reach him so desperately, the house was safe again, so Steve bounded down the stairs to run to the phone. He answered it just in time.

"Harrington."

"Hey, Steve? It's Max."

"Oh, hey Max!" Steve looked at the clock on the other side of the kitchen. "Why are you calling so late?" There was a moment of hesitation on the other side. "Yeah, um... I was just wondering, I heard something about you and Steve getting into trouble at school?" A chill crept over Steve's spine at those words. Something was off. Max was way quieter than usual. "Yeah, what about it? Is anything wrong?" Some shuffling on the other side. "What happened exactly?" she asked. Steve pondered for a while on the right way to phrase it, then just decided to tell the story how he experienced it. Max would know if he was keeping information to himself, anyway. "Well, Tommy threw a ball to show me a trick shot and it hit Billy in the head. He thought I did it so he hit me. I hit him back, coach pulled us apart and we yelled at each other for a while. That was it, really." It was quiet on the phone for a while. "And that's all that happened?"

"Yes, after that we were sent to shower and then we had to go to the principal's office."

"Oh." Max stayed quiet longer this time, as if she had to make some calculations.

“Why, Max? Is something wrong?” The words has left Steve’s mouth before he even realized he was considering asking that question. Max sighed. “It’s okay to tell me, kid.” Steve could tell she felt apprehensive about talking right now. “It’s just, Billy is hurt. I don’t know what happened. He mentioned getting in a fight with you but if I’m being honest, I don’t think you could damage him in this way.” That’s when Steve knew that his worries weren’t misplaced. If Billy was being treated like this, chances were that Max wasn’t safe either. She spent a lot of time at Lucas and El’s houses, but the reality of the situation still hit Steve like a wave of freezing cold water. What he had witnessed at school was indeed what he had thought it was, and he didn’t know how to deal with it. As much as he hated Billy, he wouldn’t wish that upon him, ever. And it kind of explained some things about how he behaved as well. “Steve? You still there?”

“Yep.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“I... I’m not sure, Max. But don’t worry, I’ll find out for you, alright?”

“Alright. Well, I’ve got to go, my mom is calling me.” And with that, she hung up.

3. Chapter 3

So this was great. Perfect, even! This exact moment was the ideal example of why Steve should absolutely learn to think before he talks. Now, he'd promised Max that he'd find out what exactly happened between the moment that he'd last seen Billy and the moment Max called him. As if Billy would ever tell him that. Awesome. How the *hell* was he going to do this? Did he need to get close to Billy to get that information out of him? Maybe spy on him? Ask his friends? Did Billy even have any genuine friends? Surely, someone like that doesn't have friends that they tell personal information to? As far as Steve knew, Billy's gang just saw him as the new keg king and popular kid. All this pondering left Steve with no option but to just rest his head against the wall and stand there for a while. And so he did. Maybe for, like, about an hour in total. He stood there, his pondering slowly fading away until it seemed like there was just elevator music playing in his head.

The light filtering through Billy's blinds was soft but bright. The Hawkins morning sun tended to look like that at this hour. He slammed his alarm off, quieting the room down again. His arm hurt from doing so. It wasn't that he'd hit his arm on something, more that something hit his arm. And probably every single one of his ribs, he could tell as soon as he tried sitting up.

Billy's father was careful about how he acted. He made sure to never lay a hand on Billy's face, which Billy actually appreciated. He knew that his father did it so that no one would ask any questions, but Billy was fine with it, because it meant that no one would ask any questions. This way, if he winced, a tough workout would be a just-fine excuse if someone acted worried about it. He dragged himself up and off of his bed somehow, and looked into his mirror to assess the damage. Bruises on his ribs, indeed, and one on his arm. One bruise was neatly shaped exactly like the bottom of Neil's boot. That one hurt the most, but overall, it was fine. He could work with this. This was nothing that a tank top and a leather jacket that he would not take off during the day no matter the temperature couldn't fix.

Right when Billy has just about finished up all the dishes, Max came downstairs. She looked at him as she sat down at the table, but

seemed unsure of what to say. Eventually, she managed to mumble out a shy “morning.” Billy wasn’t in the mood to act up yet. Not against Max, at least. After all, she was the one that brought him cold-packs after she saw him clutching at his ribs while he was walking up the stairs last night. She was also the one who had even bothered to ask what happened, and if he was all right. Billy had to give her some credit. The girl had some balls. Billy had been barely anything short of awful to her since they lived together, and still she hadn’t really acted foul towards him. *So maybe I should do something nice back to her.* The thought was weird to him and he pushed it back away. It was only when he noticed that Max was setting the table for the two of them instead of just herself that he felt bad about being nasty to her for a second. He’d accepted her gracious offering of two cold-packs the night before and also reluctantly told her a lie about what had happened so that she didn’t need to know the truth. Surely, they’d bonded a little? Maybe? Did he owe it to her to do something nice? He was way overthinking it. All he needed to do was say “morning” back at her.

“Morning.” Max looked up at him, almost shocked to get a response. She didn’t say anything again, just pushed a chair out toward him with her foot, signalling for him to sit.

Billy tried not to give away how much pain he was in as he sat down, though Max did frown at his slow movements a little bit. He wasn’t hungry. He was never really hungry in the morning. Usually, he packed some food as quick as he could and brought it with him in the car. He’d have a bigger lunch to catch up on breakfast. As he stared at the empty plate in front of him, his mind wandered off to replay the night before. How he’d struggled to get up the stairs, trying to reach his bedroom without crying. How Max had come home right at that moment, and just caught the last glimpse of Billy nearly crawling up to his room. How Neil had put on a weird crooked version of what looked like an attempt at a smile to thank chief Hopper for bringing Max back home safely. And about half an hour later, just the slightest hint of a knock at Billy’s door. He almost thought he’d imagined it, when he heard a whisper.

“Billy?” It was obviously Max. “It’s Max. Can I come in?” Billy didn’t know what to do. Most of the time, Billy and Max just avoided each other as much as they could. This had never happened before. “Uh, sure,” he managed to say through his confusion. Max had cracked open the door slightly and peered around it, as if to check if it was

safe. Billy sat up to greet her and she gained confidence, and walked into his room with two towels in her hand. She stuck her arm out for him to take the towels. "Here. Don't put them on directly, it'll hurt. Keep the towels on." Billy was still silent from shock, but he did take them and immediately rested the towels against his ribs. Cold-packs. The kid had actually been smart enough to put two and two together and come to the conclusion that icing whatever-it-was might help. He wondered what she'd seen. Max hadn't left the room yet. Billy waited to see what she would do and eventually looked up at her. She looked away and then back at him, and then asked, "what happened?"

He didn't want her to know. Not in particular because this was something that he felt wasn't safe with her -he figured that she would be fairly okay at keeping secrets, she seemed like it,- but more so because he felt that he shouldn't bother her with this. It was great that she seemed to care enough about him to bring him cold-packs: why would he hurt her by telling her that she lived in the same house as the person that shattered the glass table in the living room last month and maybe or maybe not used a shard of it to threaten a certain other person in the household? No kid deserved to know and be bothered by things like that. "Got in a fight with that Harrington guy."

He'd forgotten for a minute that Max was well acquainted with that Harrington guy, so the lie seemed fool-proof at the time. She seemed satisfied with the answer she got, so she nodded and said "cool," not in a way that meant 'awesome' but more in a way that meant 'okay.' It was the California way of speaking that she'd brought with her to Hawkins. Billy still had no idea what to do, so he just watched her make her way to his door. When she was about to close it, she stopped to tell him one more thing. "Good night."

Billy had forgotten to thank her last night.

"Thank you," he blurted out before he could change his mind. Max looked up, mouth full of cornflakes. She didn't make a sound, but all of her facial expressions worked together to spell out "hmm?"

"For.. the cold-packs yesterday. You know. It was.. yeah. Thank you." Billy was not the type to stumble over his words. But then again, he was not really the type to thank anyone either. Max gave him a thumbs-up.

4. Chapter 4

All day long, Steve had kept an eye out for Billy. He would spot him walking down the hallway or sitting by his car during lunch break, and he tried to see something, anything, about Billy that wasn't there before. Steve wasn't exactly sure what he was looking for, but anything would do fine, really. But that was only the first part of what he had to do. He didn't need to find out what had happened to Billy per se, he had to find out what was *going on with him*. What had caused whatever had happened to Billy. The root of the problem, so to say.

"Hey." A milk carton hit Steve in his face, which snapped him back to reality. He looked up to see who'd thrown it. Tommy.

"Are you gonna say anythin' today or will you just be a bore until school is out?" Steve scoffed.

"Shut up. Am I not allowed to think for a moment?"

"Didn't know you were capable of that, buddy."

"As if you're one to speak!" Steve threw the carton back at Tommy.

"And anyway, even if you were capable of thinking, would you even be using that for any good?" Tommy considered it for a moment.

"Sure I would! I'd be great at thinking of new trick shots!" *Tommy and his trick shots*. Steve had to do his very best to stifle a sigh. Tommy started talking, but Steve wasn't listening. His mind was drifting off to Billy again, or at least, how he was going to find out what had happened. Sure, he had his suspicions. But if they were true, Billy would probably not tell anyone, let alone Steve.

The day went by, and just when Steve was about to give up on his quest, English class rolled around. Apparently, Steve had not been paying enough attention all year, because in the middle of class he noticed someone sitting far in the back of the classroom. In the last row, at a table by a window that was obstructed from view from anyone standing at the front of the classroom, mostly because there was a small wall in front of it to support the ceiling, Billy was sat, writing in a notebook. It felt strange to Steve to see Billy actually take something seriously, but even he had to graduate at some point, Steve figured.

This meant that English class was Steve's best shot at getting closer to

Billy. Because Steve knew something that Billy, well, by the looks of how well he was paying attention, might honestly know more about than Steve, but that didn't matter. What mattered were the basics of what Steve knew, which was this: there had been a presentation project coming up for a while now. Steve had been reminded of it during this class. And he'd gotten an idea, now that he knew that he shared this class with Billy. He felt like a genius. A true, real-life, *genius*. This was the perfect plan.

Except for the fact that it wasn't. There was one fatal flaw in Steve's plan: he'd forgotten that his teacher would partner everyone up, so as to avoid conflict. Steve's teacher had stated that explicitly, and Steve did have an idea that it might have been a direct reference to him and Billy. But then again, this was a big school. He and Billy had never caused any trouble in this class (mainly because Steve didn't know that Billy was *in* this class, which meant that he'd been ignoring Billy here for almost four months), so why would their teacher not partner them up?

Steve followed everything his teacher did closely, especially from the moment that he started writing the project partners on the back of the blackboard. It was one of those fold-out ones, so the man was hidden behind the board, but Steve tried to study how his arm moved anyway. It wouldn't make any difference in the outcome, but Steve hoped that if he wished to be partnered up with Billy really hard now, he would be.

The time went by awfully slowly, but Steve waited patiently. Every once in a while he glanced back at Billy, still looking for any telling signs that something was off. Billy seemed focused on his work. He was reading a page of his book and taking notes about it. Steve had never noticed or even imagined that Billy was a good student. It just didn't fit together.

When the bell rang, Steve got nervous. No partners had been announced yet. Everyone started packing up their bags as quickly as they could, and just as Steve was losing hope, his teacher spoke up. "Everyone, sit down, please! Just one more minute, I need to show you your partners for the presentation!" No one sat down, and only half of the class actually stopped talking, but at least almost everyone looked at the blackboard that the teacher was closing to show the other side. Steve wanted to hold his breath.

Susan and Jodie
Jennifer and Millie
Amy and Melissa
Tommy P. and John
Tommy H. and James

At least he didn't have to work with Tommy.

Carol and Nicole
Tina and Vicky
Matthew and Eric
Scott and Daniel
Sabrina and Shelly

Some people in the class were packing up again, and some were quietly cheering about being paired up. Steve was just about about to combust. He hadn't seen his name yet.

Arthur and Bruce
Ruth and Kelly
Krista and Bridget
Anne and Carla

And there it was. Right at the very bottom of the blackboard.

Steve and William.

William? *Who on earth is William?* Steve wrote the name down in his notebook, to remember who he was partnered with. William. Who was Billy with, then? His name wasn't on the board. Steve was too confused to remember to ask his teacher who William was, though he would probably have been too embarrassed ask the question if he had managed to remember to do so. He walked right out of the classroom, up to his locker.

English was his last class of the day, and Steve was more than ready to go home and enjoy the weekend. This week had ended up being far too confusing to handle. At least now he could just eat grilled cheese sandwiches all day. He'd deal with the whole finding-out-who-William-is-quest on Monday, and he could ponder about ways to find out what was going on with Billy tomorrow. This afternoon was reserved for Steve and his grilled cheese sandwiches only. He didn't

even have to drive Dustin home from school: the kid had gotten a skateboard for his birthday, which he had been using to get to school all week. Maybe he might stop by this afternoon, Steve thought. He should remember to make an extra grilled cheese, just in case Dustin did stop by. At least he'd have something ready for him to eat. Steve was about to close his locker when someone else did so for him. He whipped around and found himself looking right at Billy.

"What?"

"Oh, hey, hello, good afternoon, Billy," Billy said, almost mocking Steve. Steve frowned.

"What are you doing here?"

"What do you think I'm doing here?" Billy challenged him.

"How am I supposed to know? Are you here to fight again?" Billy scoffed. "As much as I would like to fight you, not right now, thanks. You are supposed to know why I'm here because our names were quite literally put together on the blackboard just now, idiot."

Steve thought for a moment, and after a few seconds it clicked. Both of his quests for next week had been fixed in an instant.

Billy was short for William.

"Oh," Steve said. "*Oh.*" Billy laughed, but it was a mean laugh. "Yes, Harrington. So I hope you have some ideas bubbling up already, because I'm not about to spend full weeks on this with you."

"Fine. But I hope you're ready to at least have *some* input, because I'm not doing this on my own."

"Fine."

"When do we work on it?" Steve kind of wanted his Friday afternoon to himself, to just have some grilled cheese sandwiches, but he also kind of didn't want to spend his whole weekend dreading the next week, to work with Billy then. He wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. So he did the worst thing. He was willing to sacrifice his own Friday afternoon. "Now? This afternoon? Let's just get this over with."

"Good to know we're on the same page there, at least," Billy mumbled. And then he frowned. "Okay. Where should we meet, then?"

Billy thought about the question for a moment. "Library's closed, so it has to be at one of our places, I guess." Steve wondered if Billy could

look any more disgusted while he was talking. Steve wanted to see what Billy would say after that. He figured that, maybe, what Billy was about to propose might give something away about his situation. But Billy remained quiet. For a long time. He seemed to not want to speak, possibly afraid to give Steve any ideas. Billy looked at Steve expectantly, but in a very Billy way. He didn't need to speak to say "well?!"

"How about your place?" Billy looked annoyed, but he had an answer ready. "No can do, amigo." Steve needed more than that. "Why not?" A slight hint of panic seemed to gloss over Billy's eyes, but it was so quick that Steve wasn't even sure if that's really what he'd seen. "'Cuz, King Steve, my old man works a night shift. He sleeps during the day. Wouldn't want to wake him up, right?" It was obvious to Steve that Billy was lying, though it was the type of lying that Billy's so-called friends would probably believe. Steve didn't though. "Well, if we work quietly, then?"

Billy obviously wasn't used to this. Usually, when he said something, it was just accepted. There was never an annoying kid like Steve that pushed back. Billy didn't have an answer ready for this one yet, and he stayed quiet for just a little too long.

Steve decided to put Billy out of his misery. "Just kidding, it's fine. We can work on it at my place. It's always empty, it's a good place to work."

Billy nodded. "See ya there, then."

Notes for the Chapter:

Here's a note that I made while writing this chapter, when I came up with the perfect way to get the boys together. I figured it would be fun to show it:

They get partnered!!!! Ooooooh yes they do. They share an english class and they have to make a PRESENTATION!!

5. Chapter 5

It was raining while Billy was driving to Steve's place. He trailed behind Steve's car in his own Camaro, following the guy to his house. Why was the weather in Hawkins so awful? The summer had been doable, but now it was raining so hard that it was already dark outside. It was a quarter past three in the afternoon. Insanity, if you asked Billy.

He hated to admit it, but sometimes, in the right light and the right mood, Hawkins had something cinematic to it. The quarry in the dark when no one else was there was one of Billy's favourite spots, but this suburb in the rain-dark wasn't too un-cinematic either.

The worst thing about the summer being over was that Billy's tan was fading. He had never valued it very highly back in California, but that was because it was the standard there. He had always had a surfing tan. And now, it was fading. This shithole town was actually changing his appearance, and as soon as Billy realized this a couple of days ago, he had considered buying tanning lotion. He didn't want to look like someone from Hawkins.

Steve drove slowly and carefully, so the ride to his house was slow. Billy counted all the stop signs and headlights of cars that passed (there were very few cars on the road at this time, surprisingly) while he trailed behind Steve. He'd left his car radio off today. He was feeling weird. Couldn't really put his finger on what it was or why, but at least here, in his car, he could just feel weird for a while. He didn't always enjoy being angry constantly. People just saw him like that, and it got him popular. Of course, he actually was moody at least half the time, but the other part was just a façade. He knew that just as well as the next guy, but that didn't mean he was going to stop doing it.

He'd learned, over the years, that any emotion other than something along the lines of angry was not worth showing. Anything other than moodiness got him in trouble, guaranteed. At least with anger, he could get himself out of *some* nasty situations. He was never ridiculed for anything at school, for example. Everyone was too scared to do so.

Steve turned right, onto a long driveway that was leading up to probably the biggest house that Billy had seen here in Hawkins to date. Steve *lived* here? Lucky bastard. *Imagine having all that room to*

yourself. Bet he has a workout room. Billy had wanted a workout room for a long time. He had to do all of his weightlifting in the living room now. Steve indeed parked his car in front of the ridiculously large house, so Billy followed suit, parked, and got out of the car. Steve was already unlocking the front door of the house. The rain was coming down harder than ever, and he was visibly struggling to get inside as quick as possible. He kept fumbling with the keys. Billy walked over to him slowly. He hadn't bothered to light a cigarette: it would be soaked the second he lit it.

Those damn keys. Steve could never find the right one. Different one for the back door, front door, shed, garage, gate; you name it, it had a key in this house. He could feel Billy waiting behind him, standing still in the middle of the pouring rain. Steve reminded himself to grab some towels once they were inside. They couldn't work like this. Finally, at last, at freaking last, one of the keys worked and the front door opened. Steve practically ran inside, Billy followed him calmly. He didn't even seem to notice that it was raining. Even his shirt still had the top three buttons undone. It was just barely an appropriate thing to wear to school. Steve watched as Billy looked around him. So far, Billy had been bearable. Granted, they hadn't spoken yet, but that also meant that they hadn't fought yet. Which was good. It was at least a good place to start. "I'll go grab some towels." Billy didn't say anything.

There were towels downstairs, but Steve went to the upstairs bathroom to get towels. He'd realized that he needed a plan, *now*. He'd gotten much farther than he had anticipated, much quicker than he had anticipated. Billy was downstairs, in his living room, (dripping wet,) and they would be spending the whole afternoon together. It was a lot to ask to become friends with him right now, but if he could at least not get into a fight with Billy, that would be one step closer to helping Max find the answers that she was looking for. *So that's the plan for today. Don't fight Billy.* It seemed like a wise plan for any day, really, but especially today.

Billy had some time to himself to look around Steve's home, while the latter was upstairs to get some towels. Billy didn't mind being as soaked as he was currently, he was pretty comfortable, actually. It was the closest that he was going to get to surfing here. He didn't

dare step off of the entrance doormat, however. Steve's house was incredibly luxurious. Ahead of him, Billy could see the living room with a gigantic red couch and a big TV in it. There was a dark green rug in front of the couch, and a coffee table on the rug. Beyond that was a wall of windows that looked out onto a garden with a swimming pool, lawn chairs and a forest that started at a short distance from the far end of the pool. It was a pretty view. It looked inviting. The rain coming down onto the water surface of the pool also looked nice. To Billy's right was a staircase that Steve had practically sprinted up on. It led to a big landing, where Steve had disappeared behind a wall. There was probably a long hallway behind there. Steve had disappeared to the left, but from where Billy was standing it looked like there was also a hallway leading to the right. To Billy's left, downstairs, there seemed to be some kind of separate dining room. And to the right, under the stairs, Billy could just barely make out the humming sound of a refrigerator. Kitchen, probably. Steve's house was gigantic and expensive and Billy didn't dare to step off of the mat he was standing on because who knows what would happen if he ruined the wooden floors by getting water all over them?

Steve had made his decision. Don't get into a fight, just work on the project with Billy. From what Billy seemed to be like in class, he was at least paying attention in to whatever they were studying. Billy probably knew a lot more than Steve, however annoying it might be to admit to himself. Steve grabbed two towels and walked out of the bathroom, down the stairs. Billy was still standing on the doormat. Steve threw a towel at him and Billy caught it neatly. He started drying off his shoes first, then worked his way up. Steve was taken aback by this technique so much that he just stood there and stared for a moment in utter disbelief. Who the hell dries themselves off like that? Billy turned the towel around and patted his face dry, then gently scrunched his hair with it as well.

"You're catching flies, Harrington." Steve closed his mouth, which had apparently been wide open. He quickly dried himself off as well, top to bottom. He wasn't a psychopath.

They went to sit in the kitchen to work on the presentation that they had to make. Billy was way ahead of Steve when it came to the class material, and it made Steve feel bad. After all, he had said that he

would be sure to have some input as well. He promised himself that he would read the book that they were studying as soon as Billy had left, and that for now his contribution would be to make some food for the two of them, as it was getting late.

Steve ended up making grilled cheese sandwiches. Dustin didn't come over.

6. Chapter 6

When Billy eventually left to go home, about a third of the whole project was finished already. They couldn't work very fast because Steve got very confused constantly (Billy had a suspicion that Steve didn't even know what book they were reading), but at least they had a solid outline now. They could build off of that later.

Billy took the long way home, but he drove quickly. This road, past the quarry, barely had any other people on it. It was fantastic, because this meant that Billy could drive as fast as he wanted. He'd blasted his music up as loud as possible, lit a cigarette and rolled the windows down. This was the best feeling that existed in this town. He yelled as loud as he could while the trees passed him by quickly on his sides.

Billy didn't know if anyone had ever spotted him doing this, but he didn't think that he would mind if anyone did. He figured it looked pretty cool, actually. It *felt* pretty cool. As he got off of the deserted road, back into the town, he closed his windows again. He turned his music down low as well. Neil never liked it when Billy came back to the house with the music on full blast. He said it was embarrassing. He didn't want to disturb the neighbours. Billy always laughed internally a little when Neil said things like that: it wasn't as if the guy *wasn't* yelling at the top of his lungs every other day. He was sure that the neighbours had to be able to hear that.

The roads in this neighbourhood were structured in a way that was very similar to the roads near Steve's house, Billy noticed. The only difference was that this neighbourhood was on the other side of Hawkins, so the houses were smaller and cheaper. Hawkins really seemed to be structured in a "right side of the tracks-wrong side of the tracks" kind of way. Though Billy lived closer to that border than some other people in the town, it was still very obvious if you knew what to look for.

Billy pulled into the driveway next to his house, and stopped the car. He shut the engine off, but he didn't get out. He peered into the house. Through the window in the living room he could see Max. She was having dinner. Susan's spot at the table was empty once again. Of course. Neil was probably on the other side of the table. Max was looking down at her plate, not even bothering to glance up. It seemed

like it was time for Billy to bring some life to the party.

He got out of his car and slammed the door as hard as he dared without breaking it. Max didn't look up. She knew who had arrived.

"You're late." Billy had barely closed the front door behind him. He knew that he was late, in fact he was late on purpose, but Neil was watching him closely already. For the sake of making it look like it was an accident that he was late, Billy looked at the clock. He knew Neil wouldn't believe him, but that didn't matter. Billy turned around to face the table that Neil was sitting at. Max had her back towards Billy, and was still staring at her plate as if her life depended on it. Maybe it did, who knew? In this house, that was never sure.

Billy had a tactic in mind. He knew there was one thing that Neil had a soft spot for, that might kind of get him out of this situation. "Sorry. Lost track of time. I was working on a project for English." Neil could always complain about something, but Billy knew that Neil was less bothered by Billy coming home late if it was for a good reason. That good reason could only be working hard at school, and it just so happened to be true as well, today. Neil squinted his eyes at Billy. "What project? And mind your language."

"We have to do a presentation on *Pride and Prejudice*, sir." Neil stood up from his spot at the table. Max slowly reached to a bowl in the middle of the table with some salad, and fished a piece of cucumber out of it. She attempted to eat it as quietly as she could. Billy noticed that her plate was already empty.

"Is it a group project?"

"Yes, sir." Neil slowly made his way over to where Billy was stood.

"Who are you working with?"

"Steve Harrington, sir." Something in Neil's face changed, and he took another step towards Billy. "Is that the same Steve that you, as your principal put it, 'got into an altercation with'?"

Billy noticed the flaw in his plan to get out of this situation unscathed. He had to keep it together. "Yes, sir." He made sure to speak firmly. *Don't mumble. Don't mumble. Don't mumble.* Neil knew that Billy knew his mistake. Neil most likely didn't care to know if Billy had partnered up with Steve voluntarily or if it had been decided by a teacher. He didn't care to ask, at least.

Billy said nothing, just closed his eyes. Right before his eyes closed, he saw Max cover her ears.

“Now go get that project done and over with. I don’t want to hear that Harrington name again, got it?” Billy nodded. “Yes, sir.” And with that, it was over. Neil motioned for Billy to go upstairs, and he did. “And don’t come down here lookin’ for food! Sit your punishment out!”

Billy worked on his school work at his desk while smoking cigarette after cigarette. He had his window open to let the smoke out a bit, and he listened closely to all the sounds that were being made in the house. Not long after he’d gotten to his room, he had heard Max walk past his room to her own. Downstairs, the fridge closed loudly, a TV turned on, and every once in a while Neil yelled something. He was probably watching some sports game. Max was quiet in her room. Hours later, Billy heard Neil go to bed. He waited another half hour, and when everything remained quiet he opened his door just the slightest bit. Billy peered out onto the hallway. Everything was dark. To anyone else it would seem that Billy was the only one awake, but Billy knew that there was someone else that was up at this hour. He walked back to his bed to grab his school bag and then silently crept out of his room, onto the hallway. Right in front of Billy when he opened his room’s door was the staircase that led downstairs. To his left, there was a short hallway. Neil’s bedroom was next to Billy’s, and there was a bathroom on the opposite side of the hallway, next to the staircase. It was right in front of Neil’s room. And further past that, there was another room. It was not visible from where Billy was stood right now, because it was just around a corner. Billy knew how to tiptoe. Front of the foot first, then the heel. Always put your weight on the foot that stays on the floor. Don’t wear shoes. And in that way, he slowly made his way to Neil’s bedroom door. When he reached it, he pulled his school bag close to his chest. He couldn’t risk hitting it against a doorknob now and waking Neil up. He stood still for a moment to listen. Neil was the loudest snorer that Billy had ever encountered, it kept him up at night because it was so loud, but that didn’t keep Billy from worrying that the guy would wake up now. Neil was also a light sleeper, he’d learned. After Billy made sure that Neil was still sound asleep, he continued on his way. One step further and he saw the door.

There was no light coming from under it, but Billy was sure of his case. He walked closer and closer, and at last, *at last*, he’d reached it.

He tapped on the door twice, as quietly as he could; just enough to be heard if you were paying attention. He waited patiently. It took forever. Or, maybe, it only took a few seconds, but Billy couldn't seem to not interpret Neil's snoring as some sort of chainsaw that was ready to slice through his body the moment he made a wrong movement. Waiting for anything to happen out here in the hallway wasn't the most comfortable moment Billy had ever experienced, so to say.

And then the doorknob twisted, ever so slightly. Slowly, also without making a sound, it kept twisting, until the door cracked open slightly. There was a flash of red hair, and then there was a blue eye looking at Billy through the crack. The door opened further to show Max's full face.

"Can I come in?" Billy mouthed. Max opened the door further and stepped out of the way to let Billy in. Once he was inside and Max had closed her door, it was safe to speak up. Or, well, whisper. Max turned on a faint light. She looked at Billy questioningly, but he said nothing. He put his bag on the floor and opened it and pulled out a sandwich, which had been put into a plastic zip-lock bag.

Max was still staring at Billy when he stood up and held it out to her.

"What is that for?" she whispered. Billy wasn't sure what to say.

"It's for you. To eat. I noticed there wasn't enough food." Max was still staring at the bread that Billy was holding.

She never knew that Billy noticed so many things, but apparently he knew that she didn't like cucumber. She didn't enjoy it, that much was true, but when you're hungry that doesn't matter. He'd noticed that. Had he come home late on purpose for this reason?

Max was torn between two questions to ask. She didn't know where Billy had gotten this food: for all she knew he fished it out of a trash bin to give it to her for his own entertainment. She figured he might be the type to do that if he was feeling especially evil that day. But the sandwich looked fine, it even seemed as fresh as it could be for having been in a backpack since at least seven in the evening, and the zip-lock bag didn't seem dirty, either. So, she went with the other question, which would also make her come off a little more kind. That seemed like a good attitude to have when she was being offered food when she was hungry. *"Don't you want to eat it? You haven't had dinner."*

Max wasn't sure if she had seen what happened next correctly. After

all, there wasn't much light. She didn't want to wake Neil up, so she had just turned on a small lamp on her nightstand. But, if she had really seen what she had thought she had just seen, Billy had smiled a little bit. A genuine smile. For his sake, she hoped that he had smiled. He'd been through a lot the last year or so, and she didn't mind him being nice to her. It was weird, but not bad. "I ate somewhere else already." Max looked from Billy at the sandwich and back to Billy.

"This one was left over. Person I was with didn't want it. Figured I'd bring it home, maybe we'd need it. And it turns out we do." Max had made her decision. She took the bag with the sandwich from Billy's hand. "Thank you."

And then, neither of them knew what to do. This was new to them. Should Billy leave, and let Max eat alone? Should Max invite him to stay? What would he do here? Would they *chat*? Like, *talk about their day*? It seemed rude to just make Billy leave, Max thought. But it would also be awkward to ask him to stay. Billy was eyeing the door, but it was obvious that he didn't know what to do either. Max had an idea.

She opened the zip-lock bag and took the sandwich out. This, at first, seemed to make Billy feel uncomfortable. It was possible that he now felt like he was intruding, but Max didn't let that last long. She broke the sandwich in half (it was toasted or grilled or something like that) and held one of the halves out at Billy. He looked at it and then back at Max. "No, it's for you." Max rolled her eyes and broke the half up into another two halves without saying a word. Then, she offered the quarter piece of bread to Billy. He hesitated and she sat down against her bed, still holding the bread up at him.

She took a bite of one of her pieces of bread. She didn't look at Billy. Just ate. And eventually, after her second bite, she felt Billy take the piece of bread from her outstretched hand and sit down next to her. They didn't speak. Billy ate quietly and as slow as he could, it seemed, but he still finished his piece of bread pretty quickly. *Seems he didn't each that much at that other place after all.*

Max ended up offering the other quarter of bread to Billy as well. Billy took it.

Notes for the Chapter:

My longest chapter yet! I hope you are all staying healthy and happy!

7. Chapter 7

Steve woke up in the kitchen this morning. He'd spent all night reading *Pride and Prejudice* in order to catch up with Billy, and had forgotten to at least move to the couch to continue reading after Billy had left. He slowly sat up, trying not to crack the bones in his back too hard. His shoulders and neck were aching from sleeping in such an awkward position all night. He felt like he was someone's old grandfather with his body hurting like this.

Steve took a moment to assess the damage in front of him. He'd fallen asleep directly on top of his copy of the book, so the spine of it was very cracked. At least he didn't need a bookmark now. There were a notebook and a pen on his right, all the other chairs by the table were neatly pushed in. The light in the kitchen was still on and the curtains were closed, though there seemed to be light filtering in from outside. There were breadcrumbs all over the table.

Steve had ended up eating about four or five grilled cheese sandwiches, and Billy had just one less than him, if he was correct. There had been one left over. Billy said that he was full and Steve had eaten so much that he felt like he couldn't move anymore, so Billy had taken it home to eat later. Steve had somehow managed to find him a zip-lock bag for Billy to carry it around in.

Slowly, he got up off of his chair and made his way over to the window to pull the curtains open. That move really quickly proved itself to be a mistake, because Steve nearly blinded himself. *Never pull curtains open too fast*. He knew that rule, yet he always seemed to forget it right around the moment that he was opening curtains. He ducked down and decided to just sit under the windowsill for a while. His leg was still half asleep anyway.

He recapped yesterday's events for a moment. It was raining when Billy and Steve arrived home, and they had dried off. Billy hadn't said much, and Steve suspected that Billy had ignored the fact that he obviously was not following along in class to avoid conflict. Neither of them were feeling especially out for blood yesterday: Steve was tired and confused and Billy had seemed a little off to him, too. There was no moment where Steve had suspected that something was going on, but to be fair, Steve had also kind of forgotten about that quest as soon as he sat down in the kitchen. In order to not disturb Billy while

he talked Steve through the basics of the plot so that they could get started on an outline, Steve had just been staring at the table. After a while, Billy started writing, and Steve had just sat there and done his best to think of anything helpful. It didn't work, so staring at the table had just turned into watching Billy's handwriting.

At some point, Billy had seemed to get tired. He got agitated at misspelled words and his crossing out of letters got more violent at every stroke. That was the moment when Steve had called for a break. Billy hadn't listened: he'd just grumbled something about getting this over with. Steve ignored him and set out to make the grilled cheese sandwiches that he had been waiting to eat for such a long time.

At first, he was making just one for himself. And then, while the cheese was melting and smelling delicious, something made some noise. Steve didn't recognize it as first, and was about to blow it off, when he realized what it was.

Billy's stomach was growling.

Steve had whipped around from the kitchen counter to look at Billy, who was still sat at the table, but nothing had changed in his position. It was as if nothing ever happened.

Steve was sure of what he had heard, though, so he set to work. He looked at the clock once the second sandwich was done, which said it was almost six o'clock. Dinnertime.

"Hey, do you have a time when you need to be home?"

Billy had been lost in the work. "Billy?"

"Hm?" He only looked up slightly.

"Don't you need to get home?" Billy didn't even look at the clock before he spoke. "I'll go." He started packing up immediately. "No, no, not as in... you *have* to leave. I don't have a dinner time." Steve really wasn't speaking as smoothly as usual. This sentence was just short of Steve starting to stutter. Billy looked at him with a mixture of confusion and annoyance. "What?"

Get a grip on yourself, Steve. No reason to be nervous. "I wondered if you have a curfew."

"Oh. No."

"All right, well, I made grilled cheese sandwiches, so let's just sit down and eat and work on this. Let's get this over with."

"Now that's a better attitude, Harrington." Billy sat down and unpacked again.

Eventually, he left around seven o'clock. Steve really hadn't done much after Billy had left. He'd just sat down and read until he fell asleep on the kitchen table with his head on his book and his arm in some breadcrumbs. The afternoon yesterday had gone exactly as Steve had hoped it would have gone: Billy and Steve had not gotten into a fight.

So now what? Breakfast, except for the fact that Steve wasn't hungry at all. It could have something to do with the grilled cheese sandwiches that Steve's stomach was still trying to process, but that was a side issue. No breakfast, then. Read the book, but Steve still had to wake up a bit. He didn't really feel like showering, though he knew that he had to. Slowly, Steve stood up from where he was sat below the window, and fully opened the curtains. It was cloudy outside, but bright nonetheless. He made sure to bring his book with him while he walked through the house to open all the curtains. He stood still by the bathroom, pondering whether he should take a shower now or a bit later. He still didn't feel like doing anything. What if he just watched TV for the whole weekend? Did he even have homework left to do? Probably. Should he call someone to hang out with? Dustin had a girlfriend now, he would be busy all day using his radio to talk to her. It was cute, but also kind of weird. That's what kids are like, Steve figured. He shrugged the thought of hanging out with Dustin off. What about Robin, then? No, she was seeing someone these days. She wouldn't have time to hang out with him. Tommy was at his parents' holiday cabin this weekend.

He didn't want to hang out with Nancy or Jonathan. Who else was there to call? His house felt too big today. It was a strange feeling, one that Steve couldn't quite get a grip on. He was used to feeling scared inside his own house, but he'd never felt like it was a space that had to be filled up before.

Lonely. It was loneliness that he was feeling. There was no-one to hang out with. He barely had any friends, and half of those were kids. Actual, literal, kids. Middle schoolers. Most of his friends his own age were in a relationship, which had barely even been on Steve's mind for the past year or so. And his friends that were single had other friends to hang out with. Steve was lonely.

He stomped down the stairs and let himself fall onto the couch. He laid there for a while and looked at his book. He had carried it with him on his trip through the house. *Pride and Prejudice*.

It was insanely confusing. There were way too many characters for Steve's liking, and he had spent most of his night making overviews of which one was which. Billy had been surprisingly smart about everything and it made Steve feel awful. *Billy* could do this. Even *that* asshole could do this. Steve didn't feel like losing this to him. Sure, it was a project, not a battle, but it still felt like one to Steve, especially after the basketball fight. Everything was a battle with Billy. *Billy*.

The phone in the Hargrove household rang. It was a red phone, attached to the wall in the kitchen. Max was out of the house; Billy drove her to Lucas this morning at 7. Billy was in the garage, working on his car.

Upstairs, a monster had woken up. It was making its way to the phone, which stopped ringing just as he was about to pick it up, as if it were an ominous sign. For a moment, it was so quiet in the house that it seemed like the whole town was holding its breath. And then the beast by the phone moved.

It moved through the living room and the kitchen, searching for something. Someone. Someone who had managed to anger him as soon as he woke up. Up by the bedrooms and the bathroom. Back to the kitchen. Down the small stairs to the mud room, which was next to the garage.

The garage door swung open. Billy looked up, and immediately took a step back when he noticed who was in the doorway.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you're all liking the story so far. The lockdown that I'm in currently will slowly be ending soon, I hope it will be the same for you all. Stay healthy, everyone! I wish the best to you and your families and friends.

8. Chapter 8

The night had fallen over the quarry, and Billy was sat quietly in the darkness. The only thing that was giving off any light was the butt of his umpteenth cigarette today. Other than that, it was just him and the reflection of the moon on the water surface of the lake below him.

Billy's ankle was still throbbing with pain. It had swollen to a point where Billy had taken his boot off, since it was getting too tight around his foot. His knuckles were bleeding, from where he'd attempted to defend himself. Neil had been stronger. Billy knew from the few times that Neil was nice enough to stand comfortably close to Billy that Billy was broader than Neil, but he was still not a man to mess with. He'd had his army training, after all.

A slight breeze ran over Billy's skin and through his hair. There were no sounds other than a car passing by every once in a while. It was so quiet that Billy could tell they were coming when they were still very far away.

A tear slowly dragged over Billy's cheek. He'd made sure to park out of sight of the road, so he could sit by his car all day. He even brought his blanket with him, so that he would be able to sleep away from his house if he decided that he wanted to. Right now, though, Billy was standing by the edge of the cliff of the quarry, looking down.

He had no intentions to do anything crazy. He was just looking. Staring. Pondering.

What would his next step be? Should he go back to the house? Run away? As much as he didn't get along with Max, he wouldn't want to leave her there on her own. Max would have to come with him if he decided to make a break for it.

In the distance, a car rushed by. Billy looked up at the sky and then turned around. He made his way to his car, as difficult as it was with his foot in this state. He'd brought homework with him to do here. He knew that getting good grades was the most important part of his plan to get away from Hawkins, so he made sure to study as well as he could. With his book on his lap and his blanket within reach, he managed to get on top of the hood of his Camaro.

It couldn't have been more than a few minutes later when Billy got distracted by something on the road. He was just getting into his

book, so it did slightly annoy him. Who on earth was coming to disturb him *here*, at *this hour*?

He knew as soon as he saw the blue and red flashing lights of a police car. Quickly, he jumped off the hood of his own car, and immediately winced and suppressed a yell out of pain. He couldn't walk well, so he just stood there. He decided to stay put, as well, no matter what was about to happen. He wasn't really doing anything wrong, anyway. The police car came into view, and for a moment Billy thought that it would pass by. However, it stopped at the opposite side of the quarry. Soon enough, a man stepped out of the car.

There was a kid on the opposite side. There was a kid on the opposite side of the quarry and he was standing just a bit too close to the edge of the cliff to Hopper's liking. He turned on his flashlight and shone it towards the figure on the other side. His suspicions were immediately confirmed. *A man, blue old car. That's all I saw. But it didn't seem right, sir. I ain't got no time to stop right now to check it out, I'm just passin' through, but it would ease my mind a lot if you went an' checked it out, sir.*

Hopper would recognize that description anywhere. He knew that it was Billy, who had been nothing but trouble every since he arrived in town. Hopper had never really spoken with the kid, though: he was always smart enough to be mischievous but stay out of any real trouble, so Hopper had never had to go see him before. But that ended now.

He started walking around the quarry. It was a long way, but Hopper didn't feel like going over to the other side with his car. Who knew, it might scare the kid. The last thing he wanted was for Billy to do something crazy. Step by step, he inched closer to Billy. Billy didn't move. He didn't even seem to consider stepping into his car to drive away. In fact, the only thing he did was take a step back from the ledge, which Hopper was happy to see. Maybe it wasn't all that it seemed here. Sure, Billy could still be breaking the law, but that was better than what whoever called the station was fearing. And what Hopper was fearing, too.

So the situation maybe wasn't what it looked like, but it didn't seem very sound either. Because as Hopper got closer, he noticed more about Billy. There was a light on in his car, but there didn't seem to be anyone other than Billy himself. Ten steps closer and Hopper could make out a book on the hood of Billy's car. Five steps closer

and he noticed a blanket in the drivers' seat. He had almost reached Billy's car now. Twelve steps more and Hopper noticed that Billy was standing around in his socks. He didn't see the kid's shoes anywhere, but he figured they might be in his car. Hopper stopped walking when he was about six feet away from Billy.

"Billy Hargrove. It's late, boy." Billy stayed quiet. He was looking Hopper right in the eyes. "What are you doing out here?"

"Why are *you* here?" Billy snapped at him.

Hopper really wasn't looking forward to the rest of this conversation. He knew the teenagers around Hawkins liked to get into trouble, so he knew how to act around them. But dealing with them was *always* a hassle. No matter how many times he needed to go send the kids away from somewhere. He ran a hand over his forehead.

"I got a call. Someone passed by the road and saw you. Said they were worried about what you were doing."

"I'm not doing anything." Billy swayed just the slightest bit to his right. What the hell? Was he *drunk*? Hopper couldn't believe it. Didn't want to believe it. He was absolutely not in the mood for this. *Keep your patience.*

"Okay. Can you walk in a straight line for me? One foot in front of the other." Billy scoffed. "Seriously? You've got to be kidding me. I'm not drinking."

"Then you wouldn't have a problem showing me you're not drunk, right?" Billy hesitated. Hopper let him. Eventually, the kid frowned but stood up straight. Hopper was getting agitated. Had he really been called at *this hour* and sped all the way here just to find Billy Hargrove getting drunk on his own?

Billy set his left foot in front of his right. So far, so good. He stopped to look up at Hopper, who was losing his patience. He raised his eyebrows. "Keep going." Billy looked down and seemed to focus in really hard. He raised his right foot to put it in front of his left, and suddenly his face turned sour. And not just a little bit. He stomped down his right foot as quick as he could, and softly put his left foot in front of his right again. "Now, can I go?"

Billy wasn't drunk, but he'd caught Hopper's attention. And Hopper wasn't stupid. He could tell that Billy's ankle was swollen like crazy from where he was standing. No wonder the kid had his shoes off.

"What'd you do?" Hopper nodded at Billy's ankle as he spoke. Billy looked at him sceptically. "Dropped a wrench on it." Hopper considered the answer. No wrench could cause an injury that size. He

wasn't going to get an honest answer out of Billy, either. "Fine. I don't want to see you here at hours like these anymore. Gets dangerous here. If I escort you home, can we leave it at that, you think?" *Give them the idea that they're making the decision. That always works.*

How was he going to get out of this one? Billy didn't want to go back to his house, *especially* if it meant that Neil would see him getting brought back by the *chief of police*. He didn't think he'd get out of that alive. But, he understood why Hopper said what he'd said. After all, it was his job to make sure that everyone was safe.

"Sure. Yeah. Yeah." He paused for a moment. *Quick thinking, Billy.* "Yeah, you can just drop me off at the end of the road and I'll be good from there on." Hopper frowned. Even more than before. He looked Billy up and down a few times. "Can you even drive with your foot like that?" Billy knew that Hopper knew that he truthful answer was no. But he didn't want to leave the car here. If he did, Hopper would actually stop the police car in front of the kitchen window and wait until he could see that Billy had entered the house. Neil would absolutely be pissed if he saw that. "Yes. It looks worse than it is." Hopper hesitated, but eventually his frown lessened just a bit. "All right, then. Suit yourself. Get your shoes on and start driving, kid."

Hopper knew that Billy was lying. Of course he was. But he let him get away with it. Didn't even make him go get his ankle checked out right now. Instead, he made a note to himself to keep an eye out for Billy. Just to be sure. And anytime he saw Max, he'd ask her how things were at home.

Hopper drove behind Billy, all the way down to the beginning of Cherry Lane. When they reached it, Hopper signalled for Billy to pull over. He did, and when they were standing next to each other, they spoke through their rolled down windows.

"Okay, kid, I'll let you go on from here. Just get inside quickly, all right? I'll leave when I see you're inside." Billy nodded. He looked at his house and back to Hopper, but he didn't speak. Hopper was about to send him off when he thought of something to say. "And if anything's ever wrong, if you need anything, just come to the station. Just ask for Hopper. That's me." Hopper pointed at his own face when he said that. He tried to make his face as kind-looking as realistically possible. Billy nodded again. "All right. Better get a move

on, then."

And with that, Billy was gone. Hopper was satisfied with himself. He sat and made sure that Billy made it into his house, making sure to take note of which house he went into. He was glad he remembered to tell Billy to come to him if something was wrong. Especially him, not some other cop.

If anything really was wrong, Hopper himself wanted to be there to fix it.

Notes for the Chapter:

Today marks two months since my home country went into lockdown. How are you all holding up? I hope you're all well!

9. Chapter 9

The weekend had been awfully long. When Steve finally saw Billy at school on Tuesday, Billy was limping. If you weren't paying attention, you wouldn't notice it, but Steve was paying attention. And he noticed.

Billy was leaning against the locker under his own, keeping all his weight on his right foot. He seemed to be thinking about which books to take with him to class after lunch. Steve took his chance and walked up to him.

"Hey." Billy looked up.

"King Steve!" Great. He was in a bad mood. "What do I owe the pleasure to? To be visited by you?" Steve rolled his eyes. "The project." Billy's face fell. "Buzzkill," he mumbled. Kind of joked. Sneered? Steve scoffed. He wasn't about to do this. His every waking hour in the past weekend had been spent bending over backwards to try and find ways to make some sense of the book. And those were a *lot*. Steve had made countless charts and overviews, trying to connect everything and figure out who was who. He'd reread every passage that he didn't understand, and studied everything that he even suspected that Billy might know more about than him. He'd read that *whole damn book* in a *weekend*, and now Billy, who had been pushing to get this over with as soon as possible in the first place, was happy to ditch it. No way. *No damn way*. Steve was fed up with him. "All right. Fine. Do it on your own, then, if that's what you want." Billy glared at him. "Jesus, Harrington. You got a broom stuck up your ass today or somethin'?"

Steve didn't hesitate to glare back at Billy. "No. I read the book. Let's finish the project already. I've been ready to finish it all weekend while you were out doing god-knows-what!" What also didn't help Steve's patience with Billy today, like, at all, is that Steve had barely slept all weekend. On Saturday night, he had been up all night. He slept while it was light outside on Sunday, and he'd done the same after school on Monday. He stayed up during the night. Something had scared him, and he wasn't sure what, but he wasn't closing his eyes while it was dark outside anymore. He was getting increasingly frustrated with this whole situation.

"Harrington, if you wanted to finish it so badly, you should have called me to work on it instead of waiting and bitching about it to me

today.”

Steve was just about yelling at this point. “*Well*, actually, I d-” Steve stopped. The last thing he wanted to do is to admit to Billy that he’d tried to call him. Sure, it was for school work, but he’d called the Hargrove house to talk to *Billy*.

“What was that?”

“Never mind.”

“Fine. Have it your way.” Billy closed his locker with a bang and started to walk away. Usually, Steve wouldn’t have attempted to run after him. One, because usually he didn’t talk to Billy, and two, because Billy was a surprisingly quick walker. He was slow today though, and Steve was out for blood at this point, so within two steps he’d caught up to Billy and grabbed him by the arm. Billy whipped around to face him and pulled his arm loose. They were face to face now. Billy looked ready to punch, but Steve didn’t care.

“My house, today, three o’clock. We’re finishing this.” And with that, he walked away.

It turned out to be the case that Steve should have at least waited to hear if Billy had anything to say to his statement. If he had, Steve might not have been in this situation. It was five past three, and Steve was still the only one in his house. He couldn’t even hear the roar of the engine of Billy’s car slowly approaching his house. Billy was *late*, and Steve was fuming. He waited another ten minutes, to make sure that Billy was really, definitely, *late*. And he was.

Steve could feel his blood pressure rising, so at twenty past three he called Tommy. Sometimes, Billy and Tommy hung out together. Steve knew this because they teamed up to steal Steve’s title of Keg King at some Halloween party a while ago. The phone rang three times, and just when Steve was about to hang up, Tommy picked up.

“Tommy speaking.”

“Hey Tommy, Steve here.”

“Hey, dude! What’s up?” Steve ran his hand through his hair. He didn’t know how many times he’d done that in the past twenty minutes. He’d lost count. “Uh, I was just wondering if maybe you’ve seen Billy recently?”

Tommy thought for a while. “How recently do you mean?”

‘Like, the past thirty minutes?’ Steve could almost hear Tommy think and then shrug. “No idea, dude. I guess he just went home after school. You know, how most people do?” The attempt at a joke didn’t

land well with Steve. "Yes, okay, well... Thank you." He slammed the phone back onto its holder. *Shit*. Why was he so annoyed at this? He could barely believe that he'd thought that this had been a good way to approach the situation. Billy hadn't done anything wrong. If anything, Steve had to step up his game. But he knew that, and he had. And now, Billy ditched their project. Great. Fantastic. *Good fucking job, Steve! This is perfect! Messed up the project and guess what? No answers to give to Max either about that asshole! Amazing!*

He'd reached his tipping point. He was getting too stressed out. He ran his hands through his hair again, over his face, back over his hair. And eventually, he found himself on the couch. Before he knew it, he was asleep.

Billy was on his own couch. Or, well, Neil's. He was pissed off, too. After all, he could have been working on his project for English right now. Hell, he could have *finished* it. And who knew what Steve would be up to right now? After all, he'd been pretty adamant about meeting up today. Billy was fine with it, honestly, but he had to watch Max. Steve hadn't really given Billy a chance to explain that, so Billy figured that if Steve had a problem with the outcome of the situation, that would be his own problem, not Billy's. He considered calling Steve, to explain why he wasn't there, but he didn't have his phone number. And anyway, what would he say? Steve wouldn't believe him. Billy looked up at Max, who was on the other side of the room, by a window. She was writing something for school. He was supposed to be working on school as well, but he wasn't. His book was laying next to his leg, face down on the couch. Billy ran a hand over his own arm. He was nervous. Anxious. He didn't know why. He'd reconcile with Steve; it was fine. Steve wouldn't believe him, but they had to get together again for that project at some point. That was nothing to worry about. Max snapped Billy out of his thoughts. "Billy?" He looked up. "Yes?"

"Would you mind grabbing the ruler for me? Top cabinet, I can't reach it." Billy walked over to get it for her. He tried his best not to wince at his ankle, but it still hurt like a bitch. It was still swollen as well. "You take this babysitting very seriously now, huh?" Max was trying to make small talk. Billy's instinct was to tell her about what happened the last time that he was on babysitting duty. Almost cost him his jaw, but he didn't want to bother her with that, no matter how much he resented her for sneaking out that day. "Gotta do what

I gotta do.” He handed her the ruler. “Thanks.”

They were quiet again for a long time. Neil wasn't at home, so they were comfortable. “Look,” Max said after a while. Billy watched her again, and she got up from where she was sitting. She made her way to her school bag, which she had set against the coffee table that was in between the two of them. There was something of a mischievous smirk on her face, which took Billy by surprise.

She zipped her bag open and slowly pulled out a small bag of M&M's. She held it up at Billy as if it were a golden trophy with a big smile on her face. Billy raised his eyebrows at her, asking for an explanation. “I got it at the cafeteria in school. For us!”

An eye for an eye. Sharing grilled cheese sandwiches meant sharing M&M's. Billy looked on as Max looked through the kitchen window to check for Neil's car, although the both of them knew that he wouldn't be back soon. Then, she opened the package. “Here. Hold your hand up.” And like a seven-year-old at a birthday, Billy did, and he watched as Max poured some into his hand.

“They have these at your school?” Max smiled shyly. “Yep. Will showed me today.” She poured some of the small chocolates into her own hand as well and held a blue one up at Billy. She closed one eye, as if she were comparing the size of it to Billy's face. “These are my favourites.” Billy looked down at the M&M's that he was holding. There were five blue ones that he could spot.

“Cheers,” Max said, and she held her blue one up at Billy. He picked a yellow one up and held it out to her. “Cheers.”

It tasted really good. It had certainly been a *while* since Billy had candy of any sort, let alone chocolate. Max was enjoying it as well. She had her eyes closed while she was eating. “And?”

“I like ‘em,” Billy said while he put another one into his mouth. One by one, he ate the candies, just like Max. Billy slowly picked which ones to eat, and made sure to leave the blue ones alone. Eventually he was left with just five blue M&M's in his hand. He walked over to Max.

“Hand out.” Billy made sure to say it with a smile, so that he wouldn't sound mean. He was grateful that Max had gotten them these candies. She had spent her own money so that she could buy something to share with Billy, specifically. Only Billy. To celebrate an afternoon without Neil, where they could just relax and do their own thing together. Max didn't question him and held her hand out. Billy let the five blue M&M's roll from his hand into hers. He couldn't help

but notice how tiny her hand was. Max beamed up at him. She'd learned from last weekend that there was no point in trying to share these with Billy again, so she thanked him with a smile. Billy sat back down on the couch and picked up his book again. The sun was shining in through the windows, illuminating the living room with a nice warm glow. It reminded Billy just ever so slightly of California. He sighed and shimmied around in his seat for a while, so that he was sunk deep into the couch cushion that he was sitting on.

He enjoyed his afternoon in silence with Max.

10. Chapter 10

Steve gave Billy a cold shoulder for the rest of the week. He was over it. He'd tried to help Max out, but if Billy was going to behave like this, Steve didn't want it. He'd tried to be nice. Really. He'd done his best. He'd even *made Billy food*. But it was fine. It was *fine*. The project didn't need to be finished for another two weeks, anyway. A bit of delay was fine.

And Steve's week was good that way. When he saw Billy coming towards him in the hallways, he stared straight ahead and kept walking. In class, he worked on his own without looking up from his desk. It was a peaceful week.

An unexpected benefit of acting cold toward Billy, was that Tommy had naturally assumed that Steve was in a bad mood. He wasn't, and Tommy shutting up for once only made his mood better throughout the week. Everything was going well. Steve had even slept at night about two times. Everything seemed to be going the way Steve wanted it to.

Everything was going the way Steve wanted it to, until his locker was shut on him. It almost crushed his fingers. It was Friday afternoon.

"What the *fuck*, Billy?!"

"You're the one that's been ignoring me, Harrington, in case you needed a reminder!"

"What?! What are you on?" Billy rolled his eyes. "Billy, *you didn't show up!* You can't be mad at *me* because *you* didn't show up!"

"Oh, right, and please remind me of when you gave me a moment to tell you why I couldn't show up?" Steve was clenching his jaw shut as tight as he could. "You could have called!"

"I don't have your number."

"Max does."

"Bold of you to assume that I talk to Max."

"I know she'd help you out."

"What?"

"Never mind." Steve sighed. He really didn't have any energy for this today. "Why didn't you show up?"

"None of your business." Billy leaned back against the locker next to Steve's. "Look, all I want to say, the whole reason that I even looked you up, is that I want to work on the project." Steve raised an eyebrow. "You can't be serious."

"Harrington, we're *both* getting graded for this. Believe it or not, but I need the good grades as well."

Steve considered it, while Billy stared at some girls that were walking by. This project needed to be over before they skinned each other alive. But Steve decided to not let Billy get away with it so easily this time. So he remained quiet, and focused on giving Billy the angriest stare that he could manage.

"Lost your tongue, pretty boy?"

"If you want to meet up for the project so badly, *you* come up with a good time, then."

Billy had all the time in the world. Well, except for every morning between around five and eight. That's when he did his chores. And in the evening as well. But apart from that, he didn't have any plans for the weekend. "Sunday."

It remained silent for a while, until Steve raised his eyebrows and Billy rolled his eyes in response. "Sunday, *one o'clock*." Steve nodded at that. Billy walked away before Steve could say or do anything more.

Steve noticed that Billy was still limping slightly as he walked away.

On Sunday, at two in the afternoon, Billy was sipping on some coffee that Steve had made. Steve was drinking from his own cup.

It tasted absolutely foul: Steve had mixed coffee grounds and cold water and microwaved that. It would have concerned Billy that Steve made his coffee this way if it wasn't for the fact that Billy was too focused on his work to notice what Steve was doing when he was making the coffee. He had to suppress the urge to spit it out when he tasted it, though.

He powered through it: the caffeine was very necessary. Steve made sure to keep his distance from Billy, to give him some room to work. He'd written up as much helpful information as he could before Billy came over: he'd even laid out all his overviews neatly. He was *determined* to be better than Billy. Or at least just as good. And he wasn't afraid to show it.

Billy told Steve that the charts were kind of helpful somewhere around half past two, though he had rather jumped in the quarry than admit that. Steve had kept on mentioning the charts, though, so at some point he figured there was no way around it anymore.

And so the work continued on. They each took turns writing a chapter of the information they had to put into their project, and

while one wrote, the other one drew charts or images of moments from the novel. It was a good system.

It was ideal. Billy turned out to be fairly okay at drawing, even. And then, around three o'clock, someone opened Steve's front door.

Both of the boys jumped up at the sound. Steve stood up immediately, ready to walk to the door, while Billy took a moment to get himself together. He caught Steve by the sleeve of his shirt just in time before he disappeared through the doorway to the hall. Steve looked around and gave Billy a questioning look, motioning for him to let go. Billy couldn't even begin his sentence before someone in the hallway yelled. "Steve?!"

Steve looked back to the hallway and pulled his arm free from Billy's grip. He walked out. "Dustin! Why are you here, buddy?" There was never a clear answer, because it seemed like a hundred people started talking at once. Billy leaned over to peek into the hallway, trying to catch a glimpse of what was going on. He didn't feel like interfering: Steve would send the kids away to come back another time. They were working on a project, after all.

One kid passed by the kitchen, walking to the living room. Billy knew this one: it was Dustin. Brown hair, cap on, curls. A darker boy followed. Billy knew that this was Lucas, from the times that he had dropped Max off at his place.

And the penny dropped.

Steve's whole child gang had come over to visit him.

Billy could hear that Steve was trying to get the attention of the kids, to send them out to come back in the evening, but they didn't listen. One by one, they all passed the kitchen to make their way to the living room. Billy saw a weirdly tall kid with dark hair. Max's friend was behind him. Max always referred to her as El, but Billy wasn't sure if that was her full name. After them came a boy that Billy hadn't seen before. He had dark brown hair, and didn't seem to be speaking at all. The chatter went on in the living room, but the hall had quieted down. Max wasn't there.

Steve poked his head into the kitchen. "Sorry, just... give me a moment to get them out of here, okay?" Billy nodded. It was time for him to take a break, anyway.

The moment that Steve had taken was a very long one. Everyone in the living room kept talking, but Billy couldn't make out what was

being said. He was eyeing the clock in the kitchen. He'd had his break and then decided to just get back to work, but by now an hour had passed. Now, it was Billy's turn to get pissed off. He couldn't stand the fact that he was being ditched by Steve Harrington *in Steve Harrington's kitchen*. For a bunch of kids. While they were working on a project, after Steve had gotten mad at *him* for not showing up.

Billy watched the clock as the time ticked by, and once it reached five o'clock, he was over it. He didn't feel like arguing with Steve. Not in front of a bunch of kids. So he did what was sensible, and packed his stuff. He shoved everything that was his into his bag and put his coffee mug on the kitchen counter. When he walked out of the kitchen, he felt as if he could feel his heartbeat drum in his ears. He made sure not to look at the living room. If he did that, this would not end nicely. He just wanted to leave. He stepped into the hallways as self-assured as he could, and took three big steps. It was enough to reach the front door. He made sure to slam it shut just a little too hard when he closed it. *Don't look back, don't look back, don't look back*. He got into his car as quick as he could. Barely even bothered to put his bag in the passenger's seat neatly. As he raced out of Steve's driveway, he looked in his rear view mirror.

Steve was standing by the front door.

Notes for the Chapter:

A relatively short, mostly filler chapter today, as I have been busy moving to my own place. I'll be sure to make the next one extra long :-)) I have something good planned for it already. I'm donating my hair the day after tomorrow, I'm really excited! I hope you all are doing well <3

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

trigger warning: in this chapter there is a section where neil beats billy up pretty badly. if you feel that you can't or shouldn't read this part, please don't. your own well-being always comes first! if you or anyone you know is a victim of domestic abuse, please call an emergency number or reach out to anyone who could help you, i would be willing to try my best to help you out of such a situation as well! abusive situations can be life-threatening, especially in these times of a pandemic. stay safe, everyone. you are loved.

This is the way that it went: Wednesday was the last time that Steve and Billy had decided to meet up. They had come to this agreement after Steve had tracked Billy down after English class on Tuesday. It had taken a lot of apologising from Steve's part and a lot of glaring from Billy's part, but eventually, they had made this arrangement: one last time, they would meet up before the presentation on Friday, and that would be that.

So when Billy drove to Steve's house on Wednesday afternoon, he had no idea that his day would end the way that it did.

Steve was already busy writing a paragraph of the last chapter of their presentation when Billy arrived at his house. Steve knew that it was Billy who was in his driveway because of the roar of the engine of the car. Only Billy had a car that made noise like that. Billy's school schedule was different from Steve's, so Steve had had a bit of time to catch up on the last few things needed before Billy arrived from his last class. He'd finished his second to last paragraph, and was already halfway done with his last paragraph when Billy finally showed up. Steve was very pleased with himself when he walked to the front door to let Billy in. The project would finally be over soon, *and* Steve had found a bit of fresh confidence in his academic skills.

Billy still had his last two paragraphs left to write when he arrived at Steve's place, so he wasn't exactly happy to see the smirk on Steve's

face when he stepped into the boy's house. He knew what that meant. And he also knew that Steve was *not* going to shut up about it. So without saying a word, he walked over to the kitchen and set to work immediately.

Billy wanted to get this over with *so badly*. He wanted to be away from Steve. And after this, he never wanted to see him again. Steve had been so childish throughout all of this. Billy *knew* that Steve hadn't even opened the book yet when the project was assigned. Steve had given Billy the *silent treatment*, of all things imaginable. He'd left him alone in a god-damn kitchen for over an hour.

And Steve seemed just fine with it. Billy had let Steve boss him around, and not once had Steve stopped to consider what Billy's thoughts on any of this could be.

Without saying a word, Billy wrote. Steve attempted to make some small talk a couple of times in the beginning, and for the sake of handling this in the least childish way to preserve some of his own dignity, Billy had quietly nodded and hummed in agreement with whatever it could have been that Steve had been saying. Billy wasn't listening. Soon enough, Steve quieted down, and Billy could finally work in peace.

And he worked well. After a while, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Steve had finished his last paragraph, and at that point, Billy had one paragraph left. He wrote twice as fast as Steve, apparently. Steve was leaning back on the hind legs of his chair, looking out the window, while Billy wrote.

Minutes passed, and everything seemed well, when Steve slammed his chair down onto the ground seemingly out of nowhere. He stood up and paced towards the window. He'd heard something. He was sure. Something was walking around the house. He peered out of the kitchen window for a while, checking every bush in sight, and heard Billy move around in his seat. He didn't mind it. He couldn't see anything in the garden here.

"Steve, I don't know what you're thinking but you'd better get back to work here."

Something was welling up in Steve's chest. "There's nothing left for me to do," he bit back at Billy. He turned around to face him, but Billy was still focused on his own writing. He waited him out for a moment, but Billy showed no signs of stopping to look at Steve. "I'm just going to go investigate that for a second, I'll be right back."

“Investigate what?”

Steve had already been making his way to the hallway, when he stopped in his tracks.

“Investigate *what*? Didn’t you hear that sound just now?”

Billy still didn’t look up. “No.”

“Well, fine then, but I did. I’m going to see what it was.”

Billy looked up at Steve this time.

“Harrington, stop making excuses and *get to work!*”

“I told you already, prick, I finished all of my work! Not my fault that you’re not finished yet!” Steve continued on his way to the hall, when Billy caught his arm. “Do *not*.”

“What?” Billy stood up now.

“Do not *pretend* that you’re the perfect student between the two of us now. You’ve barely done *shit* for this project and now you’re talking down to *me*? When the whole reason that I’m still working on this is that I still *had a class to attend*? You’re such a fucking idiot.” Steve pulled his arm away from Billy.

“Oh, as if *you’ve* been a pleasure to be around. You’re always late, if you even show up in the first place!”

“That’s because *you* have never let me explain to you why that happens.”

“Just admit that you don’t want to do this project with me. Man up.”

And before Steve knew it, he was backed up against the wall. Billy had him by the collar of his shirt, ready to punch him in his face.

Steve closed his eyes to wait for the impact of Billy’s fist on his face.

But it never came. *Too close. Billy, you’re too close. Get away from him.*

Billy dropped Steve, who had been on his tiptoes. He turned around to grab his things. “What, so now you’re just going to leave?! Just like last time?” Billy ripped all of his notes on the project out of his notebook and slammed them onto the table. Steve had been responsible for putting them all together. Billy kept shoving his things into his bag. He was panicking. On the verge of blacking out. He’d almost *hit* Steve. He’d almost become the one thing he despised the most in his life. Steve tried to push Billy, but it didn’t do a lot. After all, while they were similar in height, Billy was a lot broader than Steve.

It seemed like an eternity until Billy had thrown all his belongings into his bag. And when he was finally done, he stormed to the front door as fast as he could. As fast as his injured ankle would let him.

Steve was still yelling behind him, but Billy was blocking it out. The last thing he heard before he closed his car door was Steve yelling at Billy to show up on Friday for the presentation.

Billy raced back to his house as quickly as he could. He didn't care if Hopper would spot him speeding down by the quarry. He just wanted to blast some music and lay in bed for a while. He was strangely exhausted after his fight with Steve. Billy practically drifted onto his driveway, and slammed his car door shut. No need to park it in the garage tonight; it wouldn't be raining anytime soon. He stomped his way over to the house, but as soon as he shut the front door, he wished that he hadn't. Neil was home. And Billy was too blinded by his anger towards Steve to actively take note on that. So when Neil asked where he had been, Billy didn't think before he talked. "Steve's."

He whipped around to face the living room as soon as he realized what he'd said. Somewhere, deep down in his heart, he hoped that he'd misheard the voice. That it had been Max that asked that question.

But Billy knew that it wasn't.

The living room was quiet. Max wasn't there. There was a football game on the TV, and four cans of beer already empty on the new coffee table. It was a nice one. Made of glass. Neil had made sure to tell Billy to not break it under any circumstance when he first bought it. The room was dimly lit, but with a warm, yellow light. To strangers, it might have looked inviting. A cosy living room with a lazy chair and a couch. A half-dead plant in a corner next to the TV. A skateboard leaning against the wall.

But Billy knew that it wasn't.

This was the worst place where he could be right now.

He watched as Neil stood up from his chair, and made his way over to Billy. Billy stood up straight, and looked him right in the eyes. *Look at me when I'm talking to you!* That one had left its mark on Billy. He never broke that rule anymore.

"Steve Harrington?"

Billy tried to swallow the fear that was bubbling up inside of him back down into his stomach. "Yes, sir."

A vein showed in Neil's neck. Billy knew to look out for it: it was a solid indicator of how bad things were going to get. Billy could already see it from this distance: he was by the kitchen doorway,

while Neil was standing next to his chair. Five steps away.

“What have we talked about?” Four steps away.

Billy wasn’t sure if Neil actually wanted an answer to that question, so he stayed silent. Three steps.

Two steps. Neil was riled up and half-drunk from the way he’d spent his day so far. He was looking for a fight.

One step, and now Billy found himself pushed up against a wall.

“*What* have we *talked about?*!” Billy saw something move out of the corner of his eye. A flash of red dashed by, upstairs. Max. She was here. And now, she was finally seeing everything happen. The way Neil handled Billy when he thought Max couldn’t see it. The way he kicked and shoved Billy around as if he were a dead animal that Neil had found on his driveway.

Billy took too long to respond to Neil’s question.

He was thrown down onto the ground, towards the living room. Pulled back up by his shirt.

Billy tried to gain some footing. He needed to stand up again. And when he did, still being held by the collar of his shirt, he spoke. *Don’t mumble*. “That I shouldn’t meet up with him!” Something in Neil’s face twitched. “Sir!”

Neil launched Billy back another few feet. This time, he landed only a short distance away from the coffee table. He scrambled backwards, towards the couch. Tried to find something to hold onto. Anything to not be thrown around again, because he knew where he would land next. “That’s what I thought.” Neil kicked Billy’s arm away from the couch.

Dragged up by his shirt again. Kick to the ribs. Billy knew the drill.

“Now, then, why would you still go to see him?”

Billy was getting disoriented. He could tell that Neil had drank way more than just four cans of beer, though he didn’t know exactly how much the man must have drunk. He just let it wash over him. It would be better than talking back. He felt himself being thrown back again, right onto and through the glass table.

The one that Billy had known of, the moment it had come into the house, that he would be launched into sooner or later.

The one that Neil, of all people, had warned *Billy* not to break.

“Guess you just don’t listen to words, huh? Gotta show you the consequences to everything or you won’t understand it.” Neil was almost slurring. His voice was laced with something very mean, almost evil. Something that gave the impression that he was enjoying

this.

Billy was ready to pass the hell out. He was laying in a pile of glass shards, a couple empty beer cans by his head. His back hurt. His ribs hurt. It felt like he was bleeding from every inch of his body.

And then Neil grabbed a shard of glass off the pile.

Somehow, Billy had come to his senses quick enough to realize what he was going to do, and he ducked away as fast as he could. Neil barely missed his face, but he did take off a good chunk of Billy's hair.

Billy looked back up at Neil, who now had one knee on Billy's chest to keep him from rolling away. He'd get him this time if he decided to swing again.

Billy closed his eyes. Brought his arms in front of his face. He could wear a long sleeved shirt, it wouldn't be a problem.

Right when Billy was about to give in, about to stop fighting it, the weight of Neil's boot was lifted off his chest. Neil was off of him. Somehow. Billy opened his eyes just in time to see Max step in between himself and Neil. She was holding her skateboard, pushing it out at Neil to get him at a distance, but it wasn't enough. She was lucky that Neil had seemingly dropped the glass at some point in his stumble, because he caught her straight across the face. She didn't even flinch. She let him. And then, while Neil was regaining his balance from that slap, she lifted her skateboard. And with a sickening thumping sound, she brought it down onto Neil's head as hard as she could. And again. And again.

Until Neil fell back. Down onto the floor, to be exact. She'd knocked him out.

Billy would have been proud of her, but he was too tired. Too shocked that things had actually come this far. He knew that the household that he was in was not ideal. He knew that it was not normal to live with a father like this. He knew that Neil was a monster to be feared. But he didn't think that it would escalate like this.

Max turned around and held out her hand at Billy, who knew what she meant.

He was in his car, waiting for Max outside of the house. She'd managed to get him there, told him to stay put, to regain a little bit of strength to drive while she stuffed as much of their belongings as

she could into some bags to bring with them. She kept an eye out for Neil, who was peacefully knocked out on the floor, still. Bag after bag was loaded into the trunk of the Camaro, when eventually, Billy heard Max shut the trunk close. She got into the passenger's seat, and they sat there for a while, not saying anything.

Everything seemed peaceful. It was just a quiet house that they were looking at. From this angle, it wouldn't seem like anything strange just happened there. Just a neat family on Cherry Lane. Watching a football game together, probably.

"Thank you," Billy said. Max nodded. She knew what he meant. Billy started the car.

It was dark out by now. It had been for a while. A glance up at the digital clock on the wall next to the 24 hour store informed Billy that it was edging close to one o'clock. Max had gone into the store a while ago. She'd been smart about the things she packed to bring with them. She found both her and Billy's savings, and raided Neil's wallet and safe as well, while she was at it. And now she was spending her savings on bandages and disinfectant for Billy's injuries. She'd told Billy to stay in the car and wait for her. He had found that just fine. If he went in looking like this, someone would definitely call some type of emergency service. They would be taken into the whole child foster care circus that he'd heard of once before, and he was just not very excited about that idea. He'd rather stay on the road with Max, and he figured that she felt that way, as well. He made a note to himself to ask her about that.

While Max was in the store, he went over their other options. They were not going back to Neil. That much was clear. There weren't really any homeless centres in Hawkins. Not that they were needed here; everyone seemed to be rich, anyway. Max might be able to stay at the Sinclair's' place, with Lucas, Billy figured. Or with her friend El. However, he didn't expect them to take him in along with Max. He would be fine on his own on the road, though. It was Max that he was worried about. He couldn't think of any other options at the moment. Slowly, Billy came to the realization that he didn't have any friends. Or at least, not any genuine friends. No one that would take him in the way Max's friends would all be happy to take her in.

Inside the store, everything was calm. Max didn't run into anyone while looking for the supplies that she needed. There were some

bright overhead lights that made a slight buzzing sound, and some neon signs on the wall. It wasn't particularly the least sketchy place that she'd visited, but it was inviting, in a way. By the cash register, two people were quietly talking, Max could tell. She slowly moved through all the aisles, making sure to not forget anything. Bandages, bandaging tape, smaller band-aids, disinfecting alcohol. She found a large bag of trail mix as well. It would serve fine as dinner for now.

By the medicine rack, she took her time to read every label carefully. She needed painkillers, but nothing too aggressive. Billy would still have to drive for a while, to find them a place to park the car for the night. Max was going to suggest the quarry, since no one ever came there at night, and not every side of the quarry was visible from the road. It would be a good place to camp out without getting caught.

After Max had settled on a brand of painkillers, she needed one last thing. A couple of bottles of water. They would be by the cash register, so Max made her way to the front of the store. She'd looked inside of this store before, just through the window. It was close to the arcade, so whenever Billy was late to pick her up, she'd just study anything that was happening here. The clerk always had a kind face, so she had no reason to be worried as she walked up to the register.

There were indeed two men having a chat by the register. One man was the clerk. Max read his name tag. Michael. She couldn't tell who the other man was, as he had his back towards her. He was wearing light brown pants and a dark brown jacket. He was leaning onto the counter with one arm.

Max waited patiently for them to finish their conversation. She didn't want to disturb them, and she had all the time in the world at this point. Billy was safe in the car.

She looked around while she waited. Several minutes passed, and she had studied every sort of candy the store had to offer in that time. She spotted a fridge close by, and walked over to grab the water bottles she needed. And with her arms piling over with supplies, she finally walked into the full view of the store clerk, who noticed her right away.

"Oh, hey there!" Max looked up at him and smiled politely. The man who the clerk was talking to turned around to look at her. And Max recognized him immediately.

Hopper.

Chief of police Hopper. Who knew her friends. They were all studying some kind of case about the town together, is what they'd told Max. And because he knew her friends, he recognized her. "Max?"

Her smile dropped immediately. "Yeah."

Hopper hesitated for a split second. "'S everything alright?"

"Yeah," she lied.

Hopper didn't say anything for a while. He took a moment to look at everything that Max was carrying, and she felt like she could hear the gears in his head click. Billy had told her that he'd run into Hopper a couple days ago, when he was at the quarry. He'd sent Billy back to his house, but Hopper hadn't seemed to be entirely sure of his decision. And now, judging by everything Max was carrying, the gut feeling that he had had then by the quarry had been right.

He turned around. "I'll get this one for her, Michael." Michael nodded, and motioned for Max to put everything on the counter. Hopper and him rounded off their conversation, while Michael scanned and bagged everything. Hopper paid, and he gave Max some space to grab the bags. Cautiously, she did. She walked out of the store, aware that Hopper said his goodbyes to Michael and then followed her. She waited outside for him, on a bench a few feet away from the front doors of the shop. She knew what Hopper had meant inside the store. She wasn't stupid.

He didn't sit down next to her. Made sure to keep his distance, even, which put Max at ease a little more. "That for Billy?" He pointed at the bags.

She debated whether she should lie for a while. If she told the truth, who knew what he would do? Maybe he would call some type of child service, to get them into a foster system. Some kid in Max's class had held a presentation on that topic before. It hadn't been fun. Even worse, he could send her and Billy back to their house. Back to Cherry Lane, where Neil might have just woken up from being beat down onto the ground by Max's skateboard. Hungover, but also still half drunk, with a mammoth of a headache. And a broken table. Max would rather live on the streets than go back to that. But on the other hand, it was no use to lie. Hopper was right and he knew it. He'd doubted his decision to send Billy back to Neil before, and if she told the truth and explained what happened, surely he wouldn't send both of them back. Right?

"Yep."

“Wanna tell me what happened?”

Max looked at the ground. What *had* happened?

Billy had gotten home, Max heard the front door shut. And a couple seconds later, she heard a slamming sound. She'd gone to the staircase to see what was happening, and the next thing she knew, Billy was sent flying across the room. She'd seen Neil kick him, threaten him, try to cut his face with a piece of glass. He'd been livid, like a rabid fighting dog. Given the situation, Billy was still doing pretty well. It could have been a lot worse.

“Dunno. Neil had a beer too many, I guess.” That's all she needed to say. Hopper would see the rest. She knew that the question was coming.

“Where's Billy?”

Max looked up at Hopper, to see his face. To her surprise, he didn't look angry, the way she had expected him to look. Sure, he was frowning, but it was a different type of frown. He looked... worried. She stood up and walked away, and Hopper followed. She rounded the corner to the car, and there he was. Billy was slumped back into his seat, eyes closed, although he didn't really seem to be asleep. There was blood drying on his face and his shirt, a patch of hair on his head was missing where Neil had got him, and he was clenching the steering wheel so hard that Max could see that Billy's knuckles were white from where she was standing, a couple feet away from the driver's side of the car. Hopper didn't say a word. Barely even made a sound. When Max looked up she could see that he was running a hand over his forehead, lost in thought.

They're just kids. Who on earth could do such a thing to a couple of kids? There, right in front of his eyes, were a brother and a sister. One was bleeding and completely beat up, yet somehow finding the strength to drive his sister to safety. And then the sister. A small girl, who was spending all her money trying to patch up her broken brother on a parking lot in the middle of the night. Nowhere to go, both desperately fighting off the fear that they had to be feeling. Hiding it under a false sense of freedom. They'd end up on the streets like this.

“Where are you going to stay tonight?”

Max shrugged, taking a step closing to the car so she could peer in, making sure Billy was all right. He still had his eyes closed. “Dunno. I was going to suggest the quarry to Billy.”

The station? No. They're not criminals.

"All right. Uh, why don't you just wait here while I go get my car for a while, yes? Try to see if you can wake him up for a bit." Max nodded.

Hopper walked back around the corner, to the other side of the building, where he'd parked his own car. He made a note to himself about the quarry. Especially if these kids did end up going onto the road on their own, it seemed to be a favourite spot of theirs. He had to keep checking it often.

When he came back around the corner and exited his car, Billy was still in the driver's seat. However, the door was open now, and he had swung his legs out of the car. He was still leaning against the seat, clearly in pain.

And his decision was made.

Hopper's home wasn't large. It wasn't large at all, but he had a spare room and two mattresses that these kids could sleep on for now. And it was by the lake. A nice and quiet place for them to have some time to rest. They might not love it, but he could hardly make them sleep by the quarry in Billy's car for god-knows-how-long.

He rubbed his forehead with his hand one last time before he spoke. "Right. Billy, can you walk?"

Billy didn't speak, but he did sit up straight. He planted his feet on the ground as firmly as he could, ready to prove himself, but as soon as he tried to push himself up, Max swooped in to try to carry him. Hopper helped her. Together, they got Billy into Hopper's car. Billy didn't try to resist it. Hopper could tell that the kid was exhausted down to his bones.

"Max, you get in the back, I'll tow the car along, yes? We won't leave it here."

And that was that. After a couple minutes, when Hopper finally figured out how the hell he was supposed to attach Billy's car to his own, he got into his own car.

Max was quietly eating some trail mix. Billy was already asleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

Long chapter, late chapter. Got really sick yesterday which caused an even longer delay. I hope everyone is staying safe! Especially if you're attending protests,

please make sure you're safe at all times!

12. Chapter 12

13.52. Steve ran a hand through his hair, trying to fix it so that it looked at least a little bit acceptable. He was leaning against the wall that separated the English classroom from the hallway, bouncing his leg to shake off his nerves. He had been out here, waiting for Billy, for about eight minutes now. Knowing Billy, he would show up exactly at two, but that wasn't keeping Steve from getting nervous. Maybe he wouldn't have been this nervous if he had seen Billy at school yesterday or today. But the thing was, no one had seen him. Steve had asked Tommy, and he'd even asked the rest of the basketball team, but Billy had vanished without a trace.

And Steve had no idea where to start looking for him. He would have asked Max, but she was still in middle school. That building was quite far from the Hawkins high school, so there was no chance of Steve running into her so he could ask her. Her friends wouldn't know either. None of Steve and Billy's mutual friends knew where Billy was, nor did anyone that only Billy knew. Steve knew he wasn't going to get a word out of his teachers.

The time slowly ticked by. Steve still held out a little hope that Billy could come walking around the corner any moment now. Maybe he had some things to do. Maybe he'd put them aside to just show up for this. After all, Billy had been right: Steve and Billy both needed the good grades. He wouldn't let this presentation slide for just anything.

13.56. Steve slid down the wall to sit on the floor for a while. He looked through his notes one more time, desperately going over Billy's parts. He had to be prepared. If Billy didn't show up, he had to be able to do this presentation on his own. He cursed himself for not studying Billy's parts along with his own, just in case. Steve had been distrusting of Billy since the moment he arrived in Hawkins: why had he let that cautiousness drop so suddenly? It was coming back to bite him in the ass now. Maybe he should just tell his teacher what happened. That Billy didn't show up, and that he never told Steve why. Never even *tried* to contact him.

I would have helped him if anything was wrong. Steve almost couldn't believe he'd really just thought that about Billy. He corrected himself quickly. *So that we would not have any trouble presenting the project.* That was it. That was all. Steve had promised himself that he would

not worry about whatever Billy was getting up to in his spare time. It just wasn't worth the hassle.

13.59. One last minute for Billy to show up. Steve stayed as quiet as he could so he could hear Billy coming, but the hall was silent. All he could hear was the faint buzzing of the air ducts that were above the hallway. But nowhere in the slightest could Steve detect any sounds of footsteps. After twenty seconds of intense listening, Steve slowly rose to his feet. He dragged his bag up with him, and stepped towards the corner of the hallway to look around it. Once he could see the entire hall, and was standing right in the middle of it, he relaxed his shoulders as he peered into the distance, as far as he could.

It was empty.

Billy wasn't coming.

If Billy were to still make it on time, Steve would be able to see him through the windows of the double doors that lead to the language department of the school right now. Billy would be walking quickly, just not yet running, taking broad steps toward the doors. He'd push them open and coolly walk toward Steve. Shoulder past him. Take a moment to turn back around to him and flash a cocky grin. He would say something along the lines of "scared I wouldn't show up, pretty boy?"

Then, the door to the English classroom would open up, right as the bell rang. A teacher would come out, and call for Steve and Billy. And while kids poured out of every other classroom in the hall, Billy and his stupid smirk would turn around and walk into the classroom. Steve would follow.

Except that Billy wasn't here. And instead of following Billy into the classroom after his teacher called them both in, Steve's mind was ripped away of what it was hoping for. He turned towards the classroom. "Just me, sir." He looked back one last time before the classroom door shut on him.

The hallway was full, but Billy wasn't there.

13. Chapter 13

Steve stared at the piece of paper in his hand. It was a grading paper, that his teacher had used to keep track of what Steve was doing. Which important things had he discussed, which had he forgotten, how well was everything prepared, all that jazz. Steve wasn't looking at any of that. He was looking at the giant "B+" that was written on the top right corner of the sheet. A B+. It must have been the highest grade that Steve had received in years. Then again, he'd also put more effort into this project than he had in anything in the past few years.

He figured his parents would be proud of him. Or, well, at least his mom. Actually, he wasn't sure. He hoped they would be proud of him, but deep inside he knew that they would react to a B+ with the question of why it wasn't an A+. He had a good set of brains, right? The street was quiet. Steve was parked in front of his own house, not willing to go inside just yet to face all the emptiness that was waiting there for him. He was good in his car right now.

Billy had not shown up. Steve had done the presentation all on his own, and his teacher hadn't even asked where Billy was or why Steve was doing his presentation on his own. Steve had been too panicked about doing the presentation on his own that when he wrapped it all up and left the classroom, he'd forgotten to ask his teacher if he knew where Billy was or what would happen to *his* grade. After all, Billy had just skipped out of the most important part of the project.

Maybe he did it to bother Steve. Maybe he had just not showed up to school thinking that Steve would bug out and forget everything about the project and would absolutely ruin the presentation and get an F. But honestly, Steve figured, even for Billy that was on the mean side. And Billy needed the grade as well, he'd said so himself. Still, the thought didn't quite leave Steve's head just yet.

He put the piece of paper in his bag and ran his hands over his face a few times before looking at his watch. It was half past three by now. If he hurried, he could make himself some popcorn to watch whatever movie would come on at a quarter to four. He got out of his car.

Steve's Saturday might have been the most boring, mundane Saturday that he had experienced in a long time. And he loved every

second of it. For a day, it felt like there was nothing but homework to worry about. No demodogs, no projects with Billy, no nagging from Nancy. Just him and the whole house to himself. For the first time, maybe in his whole life, Steve didn't see that as a bad thing. He turned the radio on and opened the fridge, wondering what he could eat for breakfast. There were exactly two tomatoes, one egg and half a carton of milk in the fridge. *I should get some groceries today.*

He ended up making a sandwich with an egg and a couple of slices of tomato, and made it a point to eat it on a floatie in the pool. Just because. He flipped the forest off a couple of times too, before he got back out.

Steve bought a bunch of groceries the same day. He did very little homework. Watched two movies, yelled along to anything that he knew on the radio and hung around in the pool for a while longer. For something that resembled dinner, he threw a frozen pizza into the oven. It was slightly burned on one side, but after scraping that off it was perfect. Saturday was good.

When Sunday rolled around, though, Steve was already bored as soon as he woke up. Out of pure desperation he worked on his school assignments, but those didn't last him very long. He'd finished them all within around two hours.

Slowly, he walked around the house, kicking his feet up high with every step that he took. He laid on the couch for a while, watching MTV upside down. He tried to think of some fun food experiments, but wasn't feeling very inspired to actually attempt any of them.

So he waited.

He sat and watched the clock, waiting for the time to go by so that he could go to school again. He hadn't missed it very often, but things were different these days. Before, he would hang out with Nancy, when he was still dating her. And after they broke up, the kids always kept him entertained. And if they were not up to something that they needed him for, Will was always happy to play a game of D&D. But recently, the kids hadn't been inviting him a lot. Sure, they'd come over a while ago to tell him about the recent developments, but he hadn't really seen them again after that.

This boredom was how Steve found himself driving around town slowly, just looking around for anything to do. He went past the arcade and the mall, looking at people having a sunny day out with their families. Mothers taking their daughters shopping. Fathers at

the park teaching their sons how to hit a home run-worthy ball. Friends having a picnic, lovers sharing ice cream. Steve was missing out on it all, and he knew it very well. He didn't feel like doing a whole lot about it today, though, which is why he hit the brakes when he found the movie store. If he was going to spend another night cooped up in his home all alone, at least he could have a good movie to watch to make it a little more bearable.

There was a girl behind the counter. Honestly, Steve had expected that disgusting other guy to be behind the counter, so this was a pleasant surprise. *She must be a new hire.* He strolled past her to look through the racks of movies. He really didn't have a specific movie in his mind going into this, so he decided to just walk over to the comedy section. There were only about five other people in the store, two of whom were in the romance section together. Steve frowned and quickly turned around to find a movie. There were quite a lot of them, and Steve didn't feel like taking his time to carefully pick one, so he chose the most colourful one that he could see right in front of him. Animal House. *Sounds okay.* He shuffled past the horror movies, making sure not to look at them to avoid getting himself paranoid, and made his way over to the girl behind the counter.

"Hi. Uh, I'd like to rent this, please." Steve put his copy of the movie on the desk in front of the girl. He looked up at her and was hit by just the slightest wave of realization. "I know you from somewhere." The girl made a laughing sound, that could have been a scoff as well. Steve wasn't sure. "That's possible, yeah. We go to the same school." Steve raised an eyebrow. "You know me?"

"Sure, I do. King Steve, wasn't it?" He looked down at the ground out of embarrassment. This girl knew his name, when he barely recognized her face.

"Yes. Uh, I don't know your name, I'm afraid."

"I'm Robin."

"Steve. Nice to meet you."

Robin looked him up and down for a while. "So, Steve, what brings you here on a Sunday afternoon? Got nothing better to do?"

"Not really, no. Got bored."

"And so your solution is to spend your time watching *this*?" Robin held the video up so Steve could look at it. He frowned.

"Yes?"

Robin sighed. "No."

"What?"

"No. This movie sucks." Steve scoffed. "Well, if you know it all so well, what should I do instead of watching this?" Steve was aiming for a different movie recommendation. He genuinely thought that this random girl might help him out in this situation. But she put the video behind her, ready to be sorted back onto the shelves, and leaned over to him. "There's a party tonight."

"Huh?"

"You're not very fast, are you? There's a party tonight that I have miraculously been invited to. I'm suggesting that you can come with me if you want."

It wasn't what Steve had planned to do tonight. He felt like staying inside, but deep down, what he wanted more than that was to hang out with people. And maybe he was indeed desperate enough for that to go to a party with a stranger that he met at the video store.

But it was a school night.

But then again, who was here to say he should be smart about this? His parents sure weren't. None of his friends weren't either. "Sure."

They arrived at the party a little after nine o'clock. Steve had picked Robin up at her house, and they drove to whoever's house the party was at. Steve didn't know. Robin had given Steve the directions and guided him all over town. He was convinced that she'd given him the wrong directions at least twice, but he didn't ask her about it. They'd managed to get there, and that was what was important. A bunch of Robin's friends were there when they arrived, who had some ties to whoever threw the party. Robin found them immediately and introduced them to Steve. Steve tried to introduce himself to them, but they told him they knew who he was already. The former keg king. *What* a title. It turned out that most of Robin's friends shared classes with Steve one way or another, he'd just barely ever noticed them. Usually he was too caught up in his own messes to pay attention to his other classmates.

They were fine with it, though. They understood. And they took him under their wings for the night.

It was a good time. They played some drinking games by the fireplace in the living room, slightly out of the way of the crowd of party-goers. Robin's friends filled Steve in on all the gossip that he missed the past week. One of them made a braid in Steve's hair. It

was great. It was a good night. Until Steve heard someone call his name.

“Hey, Steve!”

The whole group turned around to see who it was. Steve recognized the guy, but only vaguely. It was Josh, one of Billy’s friends. Tommy was walking behind him. Steve groaned and turned back to his new friends. Robin raised an eyebrow at him. “Just... I’ll deal with that, be right back.” He stood up and walked towards the guys.

“What’s up, Tommy?” Both boys came to a halt right in front of Steve. Josh folded his arms. “Heard you’re not the keg king anymore, Stevie.”

“Uh, no, I’m not.”

“So you turned bitch?”

“Huh?”

Josh gave him a slight push. “I said that you turned into a little bitch.”

“Dude, I really don’t feel like doing this here-”

“What? You scared of a little fight?”

“No, I just-”

“I’ll give you an opportunity. There’s a keg outside right now, don’t think you’ve seen it yet since you’ve been here with these losers all night,” Josh motioned at Robin and her friends, “but I think you can reclaim your title now, right? Billy isn’t here, what’s keeping you?”

Steve was at a loss for words. He didn’t feel like arguing tonight. He was *just* starting to have a good time with his new friends, and now here was Josh, acting up because Billy wasn’t here to stop him. Steve didn’t really want to be known as the keg king anymore. That title was Billy’s now. And Steve was fine with that. He shook his head slightly, and before he knew it, he was being pushed back against the couch. “Hey!”

“What? You’re really not doing it? What are you, a girl? Sure hope for your sake that you don’t hit like one.” Josh raised his arm at Steve, but someone else got to him before Steve could. Josh smacked to the ground, Tommy hurrying towards him to see if he was okay. Steve looked to his left, to see who’d punched Josh, to see Robin grimacing at her knuckles. She looked up at Steve, eyes full of disbelief. “You know that hurts a lot more than it seems like it would?!” Steve wanted to laugh, but to his right Josh was already slowly getting back up. “Okay, time to go!” One of Robin’s friends grabbed Steve by the arm, and started making a break for it. Steve

stumbled over Josh, who tried to grab his leg, but managed to shake himself free. He ran a couple of steps and then looked back. Robin and the gang were following suit behind him.

About ten minutes later, Steve, Robin and everyone else threw themselves into a booth at a Waffle House about twelve blocks away from the party. Steve's lungs were burning. Robin next to him was panting like crazy. So was everyone else. It appeared that it was much further from the party to the nearest safe spot than they had all anticipated, but they'd made it. Tommy and Josh chased them down for a couple roads long, but got bored soon enough. Steve didn't want to stop running until they reached a place where they could go inside, though. He felt safer under the bright lights of the restaurant they were in than outside on the streets close by the forest. While the rest of the group was taking their time to catch their breath, he stared out of the window, to the road. It was quiet out. The lights were still on in most of the houses, some TV's were on in a couple of living rooms. Steve would have to sneak back to the party in a while to go get his car, but that would probably be fine. Josh could hardly be smart enough to remember that he was trying to pick a fight with Steve for longer than two hours, anyway.

In the end, Steve parked his car in his driveway around 5 o'clock in the morning. They'd eaten a *lot* at the Waffle House; Robin's friends had organised a contest to see who could eat the most. It had turned out to be George, who had needed twenty minutes of resting time after finishing his last waffle until he was able to walk again. Robin's friends sure knew how to have fun, and Steve sure didn't have to have breakfast before school started in two hours. He took a long shower to wash all the sweat from the running-twelve-blocks-without-stopping off of his body after he'd closed the curtains in the whole house. He slept in his own bed for the first time in weeks, while his bat rested quietly by the couch. He only got about half an hour of sleep in, it was really more of a nap, but it was more than enough. He was actually feeling content today. His last thought before he fell asleep safe and sound that morning was not of Robin and her friends and their adventures, though. It was of Billy. Steve wondered where he'd gone.

Notes for the Chapter:

So... this chapter was difficult to write, turns out. Sorry that it took so long, I'm happy to see that people are still reading. It makes me smile. I hope you're all still enjoying the story, and that you're keeping safe and well. Feel free to leave a comment if you want to say something!

14. Chapter 14

“Relax, Steve. Everything will be fine,” Nancy said.

Except everything would not be fine, because on Wednesday morning, Steve had woken up with a start. He’d forgotten about his math quiz. It had completely slipped his mind all week long. No one at the party had mentioned it on Sunday, he’d been too tired on Monday to get even remotely close to functioning properly and on Tuesday... well, on Tuesday he had just been very lazy, to be fair, but the math quiz still hadn’t crossed his mind.

And now he found himself in front of the math classroom, being comforted by Nancy, of all people. A bigger slap in the face was barely possible. Everyone knew Nancy was an absolute star when it came to maths, so obviously *she* was relaxed.

Steve grumbled the beginning of a sentence that he wasn’t sure of where it was headed, so he decided to shut up halfway through. A fresh wave of worry washed over him, and he tried his best to suppress it. *Look at the facts.*

He’d done his homework. Not the past week, but that had mostly been revision anyway. Had he had a lot of difficulty this semester? Not an extraordinary amount. So he should be fine. He would be fine. As long as he didn’t get a bad or average grade.

He felt like slamming his head between a car door. Or maybe his arm, so that he had an excuse to not be able to write.

He hadn’t been able to get to a car in time, so Steve had ended up having to enter the classroom. He’d tried his best, he really had, but he’d felt restless the whole time. There was a gut feeling that was keeping him from focusing, and it wasn’t rooted in his lack of preparation for the test. He didn’t know where it came from, but it didn’t help him a lot either. So at lunch, feeling like he failed his test miserably, he just poked at his Jell-O for a while, leaving the rest of the food untouched. He ignored Jonathan and Nancy, who were happily chatting away next to him. He made a note to himself that he should check his schedule for any other tests that he’d possibly forgotten about, and pushed his food tray away. The food didn’t look very appetizing anyway.

That didn’t seem to scare everyone away though, because out of nowhere, a hand appeared and snatched a fry off of Steve’s tray. He

ignored it at first; he couldn't care less about the fries. They were literally wet for some reason, so his tray was free game for whoever was interested. Let them have it. He did look up, however, when someone started talking to him. "Steve."

It was Tommy.

Steve wasted no time on any conversation and stood up, grabbing Tommy by the collar of his shirt and dragging him along out of the lunch hall.

Neither of them said a word while they were walking, but Steve had expected at least some resistance from Tommy. It never came.

He remained quiet until they were out of earshot of the lockers that were surrounding the lunch hall. Steve let Tommy go, who spoke immediately.

"What the *hell*, Steve?"

"What the hell, *Steve*?" Tommy glared at him, but didn't try to object.

"*You*, were the one that wanted to start a fight, Tommy!"

"Fine, fine, yes, I know, okay? That's why I came to talk to you."

"You thought it would be a good idea to come fight everything out in the middle of the lunch hall?" Tommy rolled his eyes. "No." Then he mocked, "I was going to challenge you to a basketball match, you happy now?"

Steve considered walking away. He really did. Tommy was being childish. How much of his time and energy had Steve given to Tommy, only to be treated this way? Sure, they'd known each other for their whole lives, but Steve owed him nothing. It would be fine to end the friendship here.

If only it wasn't for the fact that Steve had no other friends. With Billy gone and Nancy and Jonathan only having eyes for each other, Tommy was the only person that Steve still had. Even the kids barely came around these days. "About the party."

The party. Maybe he could consider Robin and her gang his friends. Sure, he didn't know all their names yet, but he would learn in due time. Only, that was if he'd ever see them again. Maybe the party was just a one-time thing, fueled by Robins pity for him.

He decided to hear Tommy out.

"Look, man, I'm sorry. I really am. You're my best friend, I don't wanna lose you. Can we put this behind us?"

Steve hesitated. "What are you sorry for?"

Tommy thought about it for a moment. "Trying to start a fight with

you?” Steve scoffed. Tommy didn’t even know what he was apologizing for. Great.

Tommy scratched his head for a while and then tried again. “Everyone was bored, all right. I was outside and everyone was bored and Josh thought, you know, Billy might not be here to make the party fun again, but there are some things to do that can spice a party up besides having a keg king. He said a fight would be good.”

Steve could hardly believe what he was hearing. “And so you *did it*?! You were ready to beat me up because *Josh* was bored?”

“For the record, Josh did all the talking.”

Steve began to turn away. Honestly, he couldn’t get a grip on the fact that Tommy stood by everything that happened that night. “I’m sorry!”

Tommy jumped in front of Steve. “All right? I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done it. I was drunk and I felt like now that Billy wasn’t there it could be my time to be the life of the party. And those people you were sitting with seemed boring anyway.”

“Well, they were fun.”

“Well, then I was wrong about them, but please forgive me.”

The bell rang, signalling for the boys to get to class. Steve remembered he still had to go back to the lunch hall to get his bag.

He sighed. On top of everything that had happened the past couple of days, he really didn’t feel like being late to class or arguing. Especially with his best and only friend.

“Fine. But those people weren’t boring, okay? You gotta be nice to them.”

Tommy nodded. “Sure.”

He gave Steve a friendly shove and then jogged away to his class.

Steve waited for the rush to be over, and found himself alone in the hallway once again.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay. So I've been gone for a good month, but worry not. I've got three more chapters nearly ready to go, so you won't be out of content for a while. I've been moving to my own place and surviving my introduction time as a university student for the past few weeks, which is why I've been absent. A lot of

fun, but it has been leaving me without a lot of time to write. For now though, the next two weeks (or one and a half by the time this is uploaded), I'll have all my time for myself, and I plan to spend it on reading and writing. We'll see how everything goes once I get back to school. Are you all headed back to school or work soon? My best wishes to you all. Please feel free to leave a comment if you would like to.

15. Chapter 15

By Friday, Steve noticed a girl staring at him during class.

He was in chemistry, a subject that he was genuinely horrendous at, and had seen her look away quickly when he looked up and accidentally made eye contact with her. She turned to her friend, and they both giggled. He knew what this meant from his time as King Steve, but he wasn't in the mood today.

He looked back down at his paper as quickly as he could, making sure not to look up again.

Why wasn't he in the mood today? Usually he loved this stuff. It never ended up being anything serious, Steve took care to make sure of that, but he liked the game.

The flirting back and forth. Exchanging glances and brushing past each other in the hallways. Getting invited to the same party and sharing a drunken kiss there, and making sure it ended there as well.

Relationships were not Steve's thing, never had been. Sure, he'd dated Nancy, which was the most serious relationship that he had ever been in, but even if she opened her heart to him, made him feel at home when he was near her, even when she kissed him with everything she had, it had always felt like something was missing. Like something wasn't right. Steve had never been able to lay a finger on what exactly it was, but he'd figured out this much: relationships weren't made for him.

Maybe the fact that he had realized that recently made the whole thing a little boring. Maybe he didn't feel excited to glance back at the girl whose name he didn't even know because he knew deep inside that it would be a waste of time anyway.

If it wouldn't become something serious, or at the very least benefit him in some way, why should he spend his energy on it? Better use it to work on his grades. At least then he wouldn't get skinned alive by his father for letting his grades slip because of some girl. At least if he gave up everything to work on school, he could get his teachers' promises that they would hold a good word for him when his father showed up to demand the reason why Steve's grades were as awful as they were.

He'd missed the bell, so when he looked up, the classroom was halfway done clearing out. Quickly, he shoved his notebooks into his

bag and walked out, avoiding the girl. What he had forgotten, though, was that he used to be the ruler of the school. King Steve. And that meant that people always knew where to find him, or at least, when he himself was nowhere to be found, his locker. When he opened it, a note fell out and fluttered onto the ground. It landed face up to him.

*507 Elm Street,
Lucy*

Jesus. Seriously? She'd given him his address? What, did she expect him to randomly show up to her house wielding a bouquet of roses? He didn't even know her!

He crumpled up the note and then got an idea. Quickly he tried to flatten it out as neatly as he could, and folded it the way that it originally had been. He then slipped it into the locker next to his. There. Not his problem anymore.

Friday afternoon still with barely any friends meant another day of moping around. He'd done the groceries. He'd finished his homework. He'd even stopped by the video store to see if Robin was working an unbearably boring shift today, but it was all no use. He'd have to spend the evening on his own.

After what felt like an eternity of waiting around until it didn't seem far too early to head to bed anymore, something started nagging at Steve's head.

He thought back to the afternoon. To the note Lucy had given him. Should he? Would he? Just to have some company tonight?

Quickly, he stood up and started pacing around the living room. No. He wasn't going to hang out with a stranger who obviously wanted something from him; even Steve recognized that that would be a plan that was bound to head nowhere good.

And so he decided to go to bed. He made his round around the house three times, checking behind every curtain and pulling on doors until he was sure that they wouldn't open. He was determined to sleep in his bedroom tonight instead of in the living room on the couch, where he usually slept.

One shower later he was laying in his bed, his covers pulled up to his chin. He had decided to keep his lights on for tonight. By now he was able to sleep through it.

He kept still, but never managed to actually relax. He was listening. Very carefully, searching for any sound that might be a warning sign for trouble on its way.

Every once in a while, something cracked in the woods. *Could just be a branch falling.*

Rustling of the trees, even though Steve was sure it wasn't windy today. *Even the slightest breeze could cause a ruckus up in the tree tops.*

Once, he heard a splash in the pool. *Probably a bird, they have to bathe too. Right?*

He kept still and listened all night, as if he were expecting someone. Something. At any moment, he was ready to hear something clawing at the front door. Something breaking in the windows downstairs. Something slowly dragging itself up the staircase, probably headed straight for Steve's room. And Steve would be there, alone and without anything to defend himself with.

Except it never came.

The silence of the night was broken by a few birds around half past five, and Steve could finally relax.

He turned around onto his side and slowly drifted off.

By the time something was actually crawling through his garden and making noise, he was fast asleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

Short chapter. Hope you're all doing good!

16. Chapter 16

“Okay, you guys have been acting weird *all* day. Say it. What’s up?”

It was Thursday, 4PM, just after school. Max and the rest of the gang were on their way to the arcade, though everyone had been awfully quiet on the way there. Max had been trying desperately to fill the dead air between all of them by telling stories about California, but it wasn’t doing anything. Usually, they loved this stuff. Or at least, Lucas, Will and El did.

Mike never liked anything Max did and Dustin was always too busy geeking out about something. But it was different today.

They’d had classes together all day long and none of them had said a word to each other. The only one who had spoken today was Eleven, who had asked Max if she was planning on finishing her sandwich. El wasn’t really a big talker, so the fact that one hundred percent of the spoken sentences within the gang of the whole day had been executed by her was almost miraculous.

Something was fishy.

No one made a move to answer her. “Guys? Hello? I’m right here.” Max could see Dustin and Mike exchange a glare between the two of them, and she frowned.

“This is so childish. Are you keeping something from me? Do you guys *still* think I’m not a part of the group? I thought we were past that.”

Will was kicking a stone ahead of himself, purposefully keeping his eyes fixated on the ground in front of him. Eleven was looking at the trees by the road. Dustin and Mike were still talking to each other with their eyes. Lucas was trying to catch their attention. “Lucas?”, Max tried. It was starting to make her upset. Here she was, feeling left out all over again. “Really? Even *you* won’t tell me what’s going on?” He finally looked at her, and took a moment to debate his answer. “What are you guys keeping from me?”

Lucas shrugged.

“Nothing, it’s just that you were late to school today, so you wouldn’t know. It’s weird to talk about it right now.”

Max scoffed at him. *Of course*. It was probably some stupid inside joke about a game of theirs, and she was getting all worried and upset about it when, in reality, the boys were just trying to keep her out of their game. She should have guessed it. Now, she was

annoyed. "Okay, as a side note: I wasn't late, but that's an issue for another time. Really, you guys are weirding me out. Something happened and I want to know what."

And finally, someone got her an answer. Will, who had been walking in the front of the group, stopped and turned around to face Max. "It's not something to discuss in the street, so don't ask any more questions until we get to the arcade, but El and I have both been sensing things. We're not sure, but we think the gate may have opened again. We told the rest about it this morning, but you weren't there." He turned back around as fast as he had turned towards Max, and continued walking as if nothing ever happened.

She stood for a moment while the rest also continued walking. She watched her friends go, gaining several feet on her until Eleven fell back and walked towards her. After a couple of moments, she reached Max and took her hand to try and get her to come with the rest of them.

But Max didn't move. Instead, she pulled Eleven's hand to spin her around, so that they were face to face. Eleven quietly studied her face for a while, her own head tilting to the side in the process.

Max sighed and frowned. "Is it true? Do you really think the gate is open again?"

Eleven nodded.

"The boys... They didn't want to tell you. They thought it might make you afraid."

Max let out a half-hearted laugh. "Those boys are the stupidest bunch I've met. We've beaten those monsters before, we don't have to be scared."

"I'm scared of them."

"I am, too. Honestly, anyone in their right mind should be, but I'm just saying it. We don't *have* to be scared." Eleven took Max's free hand into her own free one.

"We are not sure if it is really open. It could be a demogorgon that lost its way. One that was left over from the last time. They survive in the wild pretty well. Plenty of stray dogs and deer to eat out there."

"Well, that's great to know." The sarcasm was nearly dripping off of her tongue. Eleven brought her in for a hug.

"Even if the gate is open, you don't have to be scared. You're right. We've gotten rid of them before." Max thought about the sounds that she sometimes heard in the woods at night. Maybe they weren't the

neighbourhood cats that she told herself that they were.

It was as if Eleven could sense that Max was worrying again. "And if they *are* here, maybe they will not go after us. They survive in the wild pretty well, they do not *need* humans. There are enough animals here for them to eat."

Max stayed quiet. She thought back to the last time they'd fought demogorgons. They weren't exactly fun things to mess with. "Max." She looked at Eleven, and relaxed a bit when she squeezed her hand. "This is all. Just the idea that maybe a few demogorgons are loose. No flayer this time. Nothing bigger. We'll be okay."

"There's really nothing else? You promise?"

"I don't lie to my friends."

"That's a good quality to have, El."

Slowly, they started walking again, never fully closing the gap between them and the boys, who moved along silently. Max stared at them, wondering what was going on in their heads. *Probably not much. If anything, probably something rude. If anything, probably not any ideas on how to get rid of the demogorgons.* She shouldn't take their word for it, exactly. She made a promise to herself to run everything that they told her by Eleven first before believing it, from now on. Getting her information from just the boys was proving to be too stressful. Either they told her too much, too little, or nothing at all.

Would they even still want to fight the demogorgons? It was a quick thought, gone before she knew it and harmless at first. But as she surveyed the boys for a longer time, it took hold in her brain. They had gotten lazy recently. They didn't seem very worried about the gate. And none of them had been close to losing anything in the last fight. Not in the way that Max had.

She shook it off as well as she could. Of course they'd fight. There was nothing as scary as a demogorgon. Anyone would instinctively try to fight those things off when they saw them. She pushed the worry out of her head.

"Oh," Eleven started, "do you want to eat with us tonight? Joyce is making burritos."

Max did like burritos a lot. Especially Joyce's. "Thanks, but I think I'll eat at home today. We can still hang out after the arcade, though."

"Good. I got this month's Wonder Woman yesterday."

17. Chapter 17

Max was already waiting at the diner when Hopper came in. She'd picked a booth right by the window, so that she could look at what was happening outside. Not that it was much, there were really only a bunch of cars passing by every once in a while, but it was fun while she had to wait. His arrival was signaled by a little bell that hung over the door. It could have been anyone entering the diner, but Max could hear that it was him without having to look. The heavy sound of his boots were a dead giveaway.

He got into the booth, sat down across from her and took his hat off. "Sorry I'm late, kid. Got another call about someone that heard something outside her house."

"S alright. Was it anything interesting?"

Hopper hummed shortly while he leaned over to the table next to them to grab two menus. "Not really. She'd heard some sounds behind her garage last night, so we went to check it out today. See if we could find something. Ended up finding some broken branches, but that doesn't say a lot. Have you already looked at the menu?" He offered Max one of the two that he'd borrowed from the other table while he asked the question. She shook her head and took one.

She had a good idea of what the sounds that the people in the town were hearing were, but how was she going to tell Hopper? She knew he knew about Hawkins and its supernatural history, but none of her friends had warned him about the new developments yet. And it had to be discussed soon, otherwise things might get out of hand before anyone could even attempt to do something about it. She rested her chin on her hand and looked over the menu.

"What about you, then? Had a good day at school?"

She hummed lowly. "Meh. It was pretty boring. My team won at basketball."

"Congratulations."

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Why, thank you."

It was difficult not to appreciate the situation. School *had* been boring today, which was especially awful because it had led to Max only being able to think about the possibility of a demogorgon running freely around town. Or two. Or who-knew-how-many. Usually, after being let out from school, she would have returned

back to the house she'd shared with Billy and Neil and tried to survive the day, no fun to be had, if even dinner. But here Hopper was, making sure she was fed and smiling. It's more than she could have ever hoped for from someone in her life.

The two of them ordered, both a simple hamburger with some fries on the side, only Max had a coke for a drink, where Hopper opted for a coffee. Once they got their drinks, Max couldn't keep the demogorgon a secret anymore. If there ever would be a good time to discuss it, this was it.

She took a sip from her coke and looked at Hopper.

"Mornings are for coffee and contemplation."

Hopper caught her eye and raised an eyebrow. "Hmm?"

"I know it's the evening now, almost night, but you've got coffee and I've got something for you to contemplate."

Hopper sat up straight and made a somehow sarcastic yet serious face, as if they were playing a game. Max decided it was probably the best move to play along, so she sat up straighter as well.

Should she ease into it? Maybe allude to it and let him make the conclusion for himself? That wasn't either of their styles, she knew that much about Hopper and herself. Straightforward it was.

"The demogorgons are back."

Hopper pursed his lips and frowned. He leaned back. Then after a few seconds, he took a sip of his coffee, and repeated that cycle a few times. Max could almost see him toss around the words she'd just said in his head.

"Are you sure? Who'd you hear this from?"

Max wasn't sure if Hopper had even been aware that she was involved in the situation as well. He didn't question it, though. "Will. He told me yesterday. At first he and Eleven thought it might just be a feeling, but they were right. Dustin saw one in the forest behind his house."

Hopper frowned even deeper than he already was at that sentence. "Dustin does have a talent for being dramatic..." He trailed off, lost in thought. Max let him consider it for a bit longer.

While Hopper thought it over, the waitress brought their food, and silently, they both dug in. Max's hamburger was too large for her mouth to take a bite of, but she made it work. She made sure to eat slowly, savoring every bite. She knew that, from now on, she would

be fed every night, afternoon and morning, but old habits died hard. When she was halfway through with her burger and had taken a pause to start on the fries, Hopper finally spoke.

"I believe that. If Will and Eleven say so, it must be true. How can I help? Do we need a team meeting?"

Max took a sip of her coke to wash her fries away, and nodded. "Yup. And we're not sure where to have it."

Hopper chuckled, and took some fries in his hand. "Have it at our place. We've got enough space. When did you want to meet up?"

Max had considered it with Eleven earlier in the afternoon, and they had come to a quick decision. "As soon as possible. They don't know how many there are, or if they're strays or the gate has opened."

"All right, let's make it tomorrow, but at nine in the evening. Gives us some time to clean up a bit and buy some food, huh?"

Max agreed, nodding with her mouth full of a new bite of her burger.

"Onion rings?"

"Onion rings."

They ended up having eaten so much that Max could hardly move. She waited patiently as Hopper finished the last of his coffee, not minding sitting still for a while longer and appreciating his effort to stop smoking now that she lived with him, even if it meant that he had to drink an insane amount of coffee to deal with the side effects that came with quitting. He'd said he hadn't wanted her to pick up on unnecessary bad habits from him.

When she finally felt like she could move again and Hopper had had enough coffee, they ordered one last thing. Dessert; Hopper called it the most important part of dinner. They took the milkshakes home to have them there.

One vanilla and two chocolate milkshakes.

Notes for the Chapter:

The next chapter will be longer, but I also want to inform everyone who is reading this of a new situation. I have started university by now, so updates might be a bit slower in the future. I promise I won't stop updating, though. At least not until I finish this story! :-)

18. Chapter 18

It was silent in the Harrington house.

Steve was sitting on the couch, wordlessly staring ahead of himself while the phone was hanging down from the wall. He hadn't even bothered to put it back on its hook, or had been too stunned to do so. Dustin had hung up for him, so it wasn't something that needed to be fixed anyway.

Now that he knew what the kids might be onto, the house did indeed seem suspiciously quiet. Especially the forest. Had he even heard a bird sing today? Maybe they were all gone. Already hunted down by something that Steve couldn't even begin to explain the existence of. He had taken a seat on the couch out of fear of fainting if he had kept standing by the phone with Dustin's words still ringing in his ears.

They're back.

Those words were all that had been necessary for Dustin to say to Steve to let him know what was going on. *Just meet us tonight at Hopper's place. Nine o'clock sharp. And don't be late Steve, I mean it.*

And that had been that. Nothing more, nothing less. Steve was expected at the sheriff's house at nine. As he sat, he couldn't stop himself from reliving everything he had seen in the past two years, no matter how hard he tried to push it away. The first time in his life that he saw a demogorgon. The way he had been clueless on what to do, while Nancy and Jonathan circled around him with guns. Steve could do nothing but run. The countless dinners he'd had with Nancy at Barb's parents' place, knowing they would never know what had happened to their daughter, while he did.

How, just a year later, he'd helped Dustin track down his baby version of the demogorgons, which Dustin had happily named a demodog, after one ate his cat. How the two of them had accidentally lured a whole pack of them to the car graveyard they had ended up at, and how he had put the kids in danger. The pure fear in Max's eyes when *she* saw a demogorgon for the first time. The sickening sound those things made when Steve landed his spiked-up bat on their heads. It was small things like that, that just seemed to be permanently burned into his brain. When he closed his eyes at night, he didn't see darkness. He saw Max, standing face to face with a

monster that was about to lunge at her.

And then, when he thought it was a weird one-time adventure, just the demogorgons and nothing more, the mindflayer had come into his life. They had managed to get it out of Will after it had possessed him, and the adventure ended there. Somehow the ghost of it had just disappeared into the sky, though Steve thought Will had never been quite the same since that. He had a feeling that Will still carried a part of it with him wherever he went. Poor kid.

Steve had hoped that after that, the gate had been closed well enough to keep everything out. But his hopes had been useless. He wasn't ready for another demogorgon encounter, that was one thing that he was sure of. He wished he could turn away his head from the situation and forget it all.

They could be left over. They don't have to be coming from the gate.

But it didn't help. Steve could feel himself spiraling already. He didn't want it to happen. Not again. His nightmares were bad enough already; he didn't really feel excited to add fuel to that fire. And what if his new friends would get dragged into that mess somehow? That did happen to be his type of luck. He didn't want them to know about all the upside-down stuff, or however it was best to call it. It could only do harm.

He leaned forward and let his face fall into his hands. *No tears. No time for tears now.*

Three, two, one. He ran his hands over his face three times. Twice through his hair. Once over the back of his neck. And then he sat up straight to stretch out and catch his breath.

It was no use to freak out now, he told himself. All he had to do was make it to the meet-up. The kids would tell him what exactly was going on there. Maybe he was all overthinking it. Surely, he was. He had to be.

He looked up at the clock, which hung above the fireplace. It was ten in the morning. Just about ten and a half more hours until he had to get to his car to make it to Hopper's place on time. The drive to his place was only fifteen minutes, but he'd rather be there too early than too late, and knowing himself, he'd find a way to get delayed while making his way there. So leaving at half past eight it was. Ten and a half more hours to kill. Ten and a half hours of waiting and trying not to freak himself out too much.

Steve ended up locking himself in the bathroom with a book to read.

He'd need to get ready here in a few hours anyway, and there was a toilet here. Most importantly, this place took the most locks to open to get to from the front door, and the window above the toilet looked out over the garden and the forest. Steve had always seen this place as the most fortress-resembling structure in the house. He felt the safest up in his tower. And so he found himself dragging some pillows into the bathroom and making himself comfortable.

He hadn't done this in a long time. The last time, in fact, had been when he was debating whether or not he should go and help fight the mindflyer. Of course, there was no debating to be done; he *had* to help. But he'd felt so paralyzed with fear that he needed some time in a space that he could consider safe. He'd brought his bat in with him and sat looking out of the window for a few hours, making sure nothing was creeping up on him to attack him. The only reason he ever came out of there was because Dustin had ended up banging at the door for Steve to come out.

And he'd made it out of that alive. He'd survived and gone home and taken a shower, and then spent his nights on the couch the months after that. Who knew what would happen this time? He'd escaped the monsters three times by now, his luck had to be running out at some point.

He tried to shake off that thought by opening his book. It was the newest assigned book for English class.

It felt weird to think back to how everything had gone with the last book and the assignment that accompanied it, and it also felt like a really long time ago. It must have been two weeks since Steve last saw Billy. He found it weird, but didn't want to ask unnecessary questions. He was probably fine. Max was still walking around as usual, so why would anything be wrong with Billy? They lived in the same house, right? If something was off, it would also show on Max.

Time dragged on slowly. Steve barely moved a muscle during the whole time he had been in the bathroom, but by six o'clock he got hungry. He found some crackers in the pantry in the kitchen, and sprinted back up the stairs after he snatched them off the shelf. He ate four. It wasn't much, and although he was very hungry, the increasing nausea that he was dealing with withheld him from actually having a meal. He looked outside, keeping watch over the forest to combat the growing nervousness in his chest. He could feel the tension spreading to every part of his body, and by seven in the

evening he couldn't stand it anymore. He decided to get ready. As if it were a party, almost. Shower. Blow dry his hair and style it nicely. He borrowed a random bunch of the creams that his mother left in the bathroom cabinet and slapped them onto his face, even though he had no idea what they were for. By the time he'd gone through the whole extra-extensive ritual, he looked at the clock. Eight. Half an hour left.

The bathroom was still misty from the shower he had taken, so if he stayed here, his hair would be ruined before he even left the house. Reluctantly, he made his way to the kitchen and sat down by the table. Twenty-eight minutes to kill. He rested his head on his arm, looking out to the hall.

A nap, then. Maybe that would help.

And it did. At nine o'clock sharp he woke up because the phone was ringing. He picked up to find Dustin yelling on the other side of the line. Steve barely listened to it, because he told Dustin that he was on his way and immediately hung up before he had even understood as much as half a sentence of what Dustin was saying. It didn't matter: he had a good guess of what Dustin was going on about. He wanted to bang his own head against a wall, he was *so* pissed off at himself.

Of *course* he'd forgotten to set an alarm! Way to go!

But as he got in the car, he couldn't actually make himself care a lot. At least he'd gotten some sleep. Who knew when his next chance to do that was going to be?

The drive to Hopper's cabin was supposed to take fifteen minutes, but Steve managed to cut it down to ten. Sure, he'd run a red light or two, but there was no-one out in the street at this time anyway. Everyone was out in town or watching some TV show or a movie with their family at home. Having a regular night. Not suspecting or fearing anything.

Right before he reached the cabin, though, he slowed down a bit to his normal driving style. Didn't want to get in trouble with the sheriff, especially not tonight. He wasn't exactly in the mood for that, so to say.

He calmly parked his car next to the building as if nothing had happened. As if he had left by eight-thirty and had a perfectly lawful journey to the place.

When he entered, everyone was staring at him. Hopper in his lazy chair, seemingly very relaxed. Eleven and Max side by side on the

couch. Will, Mike, Lucas and Dustin huddled in a circle on the floor around a coffee table. Nancy and Jonathan on the kitchen counter. Everyone remained silent for a while until Dustin broke the silence. "Good, now we can begin."

They must have discussed for hours. Steve had come to this conclusion because, by the time they called it a night and stopped the apocalypse discourse for today, he had a moment to look outside. The moon was already positioned high in the sky. Once he finally found a clock, he realized that it was almost midnight. He looked around at the people he was with. The kids weren't really kids anymore, he realized: they were full-fledged teenagers when he really took a moment to look at them. They were probably all allowed to cycle home at this time, seeing as they had all arrived by bike. He'd have to drive home alone through the darkness.

Everyone was milling around the place, busy chatting to each other. They'd left the whole alternate universe alien invasion part of the evening for what it was for now; things had been discussed, plans had been set up, but the conclusion was that there wasn't a lot that they could right now. They could only fight danger when it was actually present. If there were demogorgons that weren't disturbing anyone's peace, maybe they should be left alone. Getting involved might just stir up unwanted problems. Sure, some people might hear weird sounds outside their windows at night, but if all the demogorgons were doing was going through garbage bins, altogether they wouldn't be much worse than raccoons.

Although everyone else seemed cheerful, Steve stayed quiet. He didn't really feel like chatting up a storm right now. He was tired. Exhausted, even. Not physically, but the whole situation had been quite a weight on his shoulders the whole time since Dustin called him. It had been a long day, to put it lightly. The whole thing seemingly being resolved for now just didn't entirely sit right with him yet; they were missing something. Steve couldn't figure out if that was actually the case or if that was just him being paranoid, so he stayed quiet and looked around the room a little more closely.

Eleven and Max were still huddled together on the couch, partially under a blanket by now. They were flipping through some magazine, carefully studying every page. Every once in a while, Eleven pointed at something on the page and Max would take a closer look at it.

They would exchange a couple of words and then turn to the next page.

Mike and Dustin were arguing by the TV, riling each other up with every word. Dustin was almost aggressively talking with his hands, while Mike pulled at his hair and made faces every time Dustin finished a sentence.

Nancy and Jonathan had hidden themselves away, speaking under their breath to each other in the kitchen, getting something to drink while they were there. They had closed the curtains in front of the windows there, and turned a couple of smaller lights on.

Lucas was telling a story to Will by the window to Steve's left. Will listened intently, seemingly happy to have some entertainment instead of having to be worried about monsters all the time. Hopper and Joyce drank some coffee by the kitchen table, just a few steps away from where Nancy and Jonathan were standing. They were both leaning over a newspaper, trying to solve a quiz that was in it. All in all, it was a very peaceful scene in the cabin. Maybe if he tried hard enough, he could imagine that the situation wasn't what it really was: that they were just a bunch of friends who were spending a Friday night together for fun.

Steve sighed and looked away from the people. He'd never really taken a good look at Hopper's place before, but now that he was here and he had time to look around, he noticed that it felt quite cosy. Sure, it wasn't exactly a luxurious house, but it was inviting. There were a living room and a kitchen, separated by a bar type of situation. Steve didn't know what to call it. It was to the right of where he was standing. At the far end of the right wall there was a bathroom, and the door to the hallway. In front of him was the living area, with a big round window in the wall opposite of him. The house didn't really have two floors, but it did have a high, pointy ceiling, so it was still relatively spacious. To his left there were two rooms. Bedrooms, he supposed. One for Hopper and a guest room. Above the rooms there was a loft, where some random things were stored. Steve couldn't quite make out what they were. Some things were covered with white blankets. He was mindlessly staring, not with the intention of doing anything, but something caught Steve's attention. The door to the room that was the furthest away from him, the one he had assumed to be a guest room. It was just slightly ajar. He wasn't actually able to see inside, but he could have sworn that he saw something move.

Careful not to startle anyone, he tried to subtly make his way over to the door. First, he stood by the lamp that was next to the couch for a while studying it carefully. It was beige, but Steve thought it might have been a more ivory colour originally. He could hardly imagine an old cabin being a great environment for white furniture, especially since Hopper smoked. Max and Eleven didn't bother to look up at what he was doing, and he was too worried to look back to the rest to see if they were suspicious of him. He touched the tassels on the lamp cover to make sure that he seemed interested in it, and nothing else. Behind the couch, there wasn't a lot more furniture to act interested about. There was just a big rug there, to fill up some open space, and two bikes that didn't look like they had been used any time recently. They were leaning against the wall. Most likely, this was the common route Hopper took to the bathroom, so it didn't make sense to put any furniture there.

And so, after a few minutes of looking at the lamp, Steve moved over to study the bikes. He concluded that they, indeed, hadn't been used in a while. There was dust settling on them. He swiped a little bit of it off of the frames, but it didn't make a huge difference.

He then stared at the loft for a while, trying to make his road to the extra room seem casual. He was facing the right direction. He could glance inside now. There was a light on. On the far side of the room, curtains were drawn shut in front of a window. It was dark outside, so that made sense to Steve, but who had done that? He hadn't seen anyone use this room while he was here. And why was the light on?

He stood still for a while, trying to see if anything else moved in the room. Some laughter erupted to his left, and when Steve looked, he saw that Jonathan and Nancy had now joined Hopper and Joyce at the dinner table. They all looked like they were having a good time.

Will and Lucas had made themselves comfortable in the two lazy chairs that were also in the living room, and Mike and Dustin were now quietly watching TV. So everyone was still busy doing their own thing.

Steve took a moment to question what he was about to do. He was snooping around in Hopper's home, in a way. But what if someone really was in that room? Who on earth could be supposed to be here right now? What if someone was breaking in, robbing Hopper while he was having a coffee in his kitchen? What if it was a *demogorgon*?

But he was *snooping*. It wasn't *right*. It wasn't *his* place to look through

another person's house to make sure everything was safe. He had his own house to do things like that. And, by the way, he had been late to the meeting. Maybe the kids had put their school bags there to get them out of the way, or maybe someone had taken a nap there for a while, or maybe there was something else that was completely logical and normal for someone to have in that room, that needed to be used.

He was about to give up. He had already shifted his weight onto his right foot to turn around and walk back to the living room. He really had.

And then he heard something fall in the room.

It was a dull sound, not like something had broken. He looked around, back at everyone else, but no one had seemed to notice it. And if anyone had, they didn't care enough to come check it out. Before Steve could withhold himself, he took two steps towards the door. Just to be sure, he knocked on it twice, but without much intention to actually wait for a response. He pushed the door open slightly, and saw an empty bed. It was neatly made. A skateboard was stored underneath it. He took a half step into the room and pushed the door closed again, so that no one in the living room could see him anymore. If anyone missed him now, they would think he had gone to the bathroom. Behind him, something moved.

Steve whipped around as fast as he could, his hands already curled into fists, ready to swing. That was one part of what he was doing. The other part was bracing himself for impact. He didn't know what was in here yet.

Steve didn't immediately recognize the person that was in the room with him. It was a man, slightly taller than himself but a lot broader, that much was clear to him. He was turned away from Steve, looking at a book that was lying on the floor next to another bed in the room. Steve couldn't see his face, but the man's hair was shaved into a buzz cut.

He didn't at all seem to react to, or even acknowledge the fact that Steve was in the room. Had he even heard Steve enter? The man was standing around almost too casually to be a robber. *What the hell?*

"Hey," Steve called out.

Shit.

He should have just left. He should have never gotten into this. Seriously, *why* did he do this? Was he insane?! Randomly harassing people in a house that he had been invited to? It was probably a friend of Hopper's, just staying the night. He was such an idiot. The man slowly stood up a little straighter, preparing himself to turn around.

It's fine. I'll just tell him that it was a mistake. If it's Hopper's friend, he has got to be somewhat like Hopper. Friendly and forgiving and all that. I'll tell the truth. I thought it was an intruder. Hey, friend of Hopper, surely there's nothing wrong about me looking out for Hopper's safety? You know, even the leaders of entire police departments get robbed. Better to be safe than sorry, right?

But when the man turned around to see who had intruded, Steve didn't speak. He fell completely quiet. He didn't even *try* to explain himself, too stunned by the realization that was slowly making its way through his head.

He had to really take a moment to study the face of the person that was now facing him. He was sure he had seen it before. It only took a few seconds, really, but it felt much longer than that. He tried to find the name. It was on the tip of his tongue. It was only when the man frowned at him, that he realised who he had in front of him.

Billy.

Notes for the Chapter:

Nearly 4K words! I've written essays shorter than this chapter; this has got to be a record for me. The layout of Hopper's cabin here isn't exactly true to what we see in the show, but I mapped it out for myself. If you guys would like to see how I envisioned it, please do let me know, I'll post it in the next update. But I can also imagine not wanting to know. After all, the way you imagine stories yourself is usually more fun.

I plan to make the chapters longer in the future, but that means the updates will probably happen once every two weeks instead of once a week, since I have a lot of school work to deal with now as well.

I hope you're all doing well, and staying safe. I wish

you all the best! Much love <3

19. Chapter 19

Steve's first reaction was to take a step back.

He'd found Billy.

But Billy didn't really look like he had wanted to be found. He didn't say a word to Steve, just stared at him, waiting for the other boy to say something. On Steve's end, full bafflement held the upper hand when it came to emotions for now.

He wanted to laugh. He wanted to laugh because now, he wouldn't have to worry about Billy anymore. Billy was fine. Of course he was, Steve had never *had* to worry.

He wanted to cry. Because, sure, he'd found Billy, but Billy seemed hurt. And no matter how much Steve had despised him, he never wanted him to have to go through anything awful.

He wanted, strangely, to *hug* Billy. He had no idea where that feeling came from, and elected to ignore it.

But most of all, he wanted an explanation. Because ditching someone in a group project is one thing, but then disappearing for two weeks and eventually being found physically near unrecognizable in the chief of police's house is another.

Steve took a moment to study Billy.

He was just wearing some socks and a pair of jeans, nothing special, apart from the fact that he was wearing a weirdly out-of-character grey hoodie. Usually, he seemed to be a blouses and jackets type of person, so it looked a little off. The hoodie was so enormous on him that it almost managed to make Billy look small, the way he had pulled the hood up over his neck as far as he could, and tugged the sleeves down so that they looked to be just one inattentive movement away from falling over his hands.

Steve noticed that Billy was still leaning on his right leg, the same way that he had before he disappeared. That was one of the things that had remained the same about Billy since Steve last saw him.

Finally, Steve took a moment to study Billy's face again.

There were a bunch of small cuts spread all over Billy's face, that seemed to all be about halfway done healing. Part of a bruise was visible by his jaw, but he'd done a good job of hiding it with his hood. There was a bigger bandage patch just over Billy's left ear, decorated with a green band-aid that served absolutely no purpose

other than making the situation look a little less sad.

Billy's fingers were all covered in coloured band-aids as well. Steve looked up to meet Billy's eyes, trying to see if he could somehow tell if Billy was trying to say something without having to speak.

Billy's eyes were screaming murder.

If there ever had been a look that said "if it wasn't for the fact that there are witnesses nearby, you would be dead right now," this must have been it. Steve was grateful that Billy didn't seem like he was planning to act on that yet, though. He had to do something. Anything to break the ice, or at least the silence that was becoming heavier by the second now. Anything to distract Billy from the fact that Steve had found him.

He said the first thing that came to mind.

"Did you get in a fight?" Steve pointed at Billy's hands.

Billy kept quiet. What was his strategy? Was he trying to get Steve to stress himself out until he left? It wouldn't work. Steve wanted an answer. He wanted to know what had been going on, why Billy had just dumped him without ever even letting him know that he wouldn't make it to the presentation. That was the least that Billy could do right now.

Steve tried to find an answer to his own question.

He knew what it looked like if someone had gotten into a fight. After all, Steve had gotten into plenty of those himself.

If he'd wanted to believe that Billy had just gotten into a fight with someone in the street and it was nothing more than that, he could have made himself. The knuckle injuries matched up, as did the bruise by the jaw. Even the leg that apparently still wasn't doing very well could have been a sign of just an ordinary scuffle on a basketball field at night.

But too much was off.

If Billy had gotten into a fight, why were there so many little cuts on his face? That never happened in a fistfight. In fact, Steve had never seen anyone injured in that way in general.

If Billy had gotten into a fight, why was his head shaved? Sure, everyone wants a change of pace every once in a while, but from the time he'd spent with the guy, Steve knew that Billy valued his hair highly. When he was bored, he'd always be twisting it one way or another to get it to look nice. He didn't seem like the type to

spontaneously shave it all off.

If Billy had gotten into a fight, why was he in Hopper's house, and not in jail, in the worst case?

And most of all, if Billy had gotten into a fight, why was Max's skateboard lying under the bed on the opposite side of the room?

Oh.

Oh.

Steve got it. It clicked.

And honestly, now that it clicked, Steve realized that he'd known all along.

That sound that he'd heard when his dad picked him up from the principal's office on the day Tommy hit Billy in the head with that basketball. That sound, of which he had known what it was deep inside, but which he had been too surprised by to act upon. That sound echoed in his head now, as he looked at Billy.

He spoke with purpose this time.

"What happened?"

Something washed over Billy's face. He seemed to relax for just a split second, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it type of thing. Was it sadness? Was it joy? Was it appreciation?

"Get out," he said. Almost snarled, spat, whatever. Steve didn't know the fancy word for it, but it had not come out in a friendly way. It had been pure hatred that had crossed Billy's face.

But Steve wasn't going to give up. He still wanted his answers, and now, even more than answers, he found himself wanting to help. He had no idea how or why, but he did.

"Why? No. I want an answer."

Billy lowered his voice. "There's no answers to be given here. Get out."

Steve crossed his arms. "Listen up, you. You ditched me on the day of our presentation. Seriously, that's just rude, even by *your* standards. And then on top of that, you fall off the face of the earth. No call to tell me you weren't coming to the presentation, no call to apologize that you didn't, no nothing. And now I find you creeping around in Hopper's house and you tell me there's *nothing to be questioned*? Come on!"

"I mean it, Harrington. Go back to your friends."

“They’re not my friends.”

Billy raised his eyebrows just slightly, but not as much as Steve did. *Had he really just said that?* That was something to unpack later.

“Whatever suits you. Just go.”

For some reason, that was *it*. The pot finally boiled over.

“Billy, I have been worrying my ass off for the last two weeks because no one has seen you and no one seems to care about the fact that you randomly disappeared and you left me to figure that project out on my own when you *know*, and I know you know because we spent time together, that I found it the most difficult thing we’ve done in school. Now, what the hell is going on? You can’t expect me to find you in a state like this and not at least want to offer you just a tiny bit of *help!*”

There. He said it. Billy just about *had* to open up now. Even the most stubborn donkey on earth knew when to accept a helping hand.

And it worked. To Steve’s slight surprise, it worked. Sure, he’d expected it to work, but it was still Billy that he was dealing with: a guy who was known to just always be angry. But Billy dropped his shoulders and relaxed his face, taking the murder eyes away along with it. *Finally*. At last they could have a decent conversation, for once in their lives.

Billy took a step closer to Steve, carefully, slowly, making sure to stand on his good leg. They were only a few centimetres apart. If he wanted to, Steve only had to raise his arm to touch Billy. He looked up, keeping close tabs on what Billy was doing with his face. The warning signs usually seemed to start there. Billy leaned in close to Steve’s face.

Their noses were almost touching now. It was like Steve could feel Billy’s breath, hear his heartbeat, see even the tiniest freckle on his skin.

Steve didn’t know what to do. What was Billy doing? Should he take a step back? Close the distance and hug him? Push him away?

He decided to stay still, to let Billy do what he wanted to. If he wanted to hear what Billy had to say, he had to let him speak.

And he did.

“I don’t want your help.”

It was short, but sharp enough to leave a physical sting going through

Steve's chest, spreading through his whole body before disappearing almost completely, leaving just the slightest trace behind where Steve figured was the space between both his lungs.

He wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but it had not been this. This was cold, even for Billy's standards. This was more than mean. It was hostile.

Steve lost his composure. He could feel his face fall and his shoulders lower. Slowly, he took half a step back. The words echoed through his head, and as they seemed to get louder, Steve had to fight harder and harder not to cry. Because for some reason, for *some god-damned, cursed, annoying, illogical, weird-ass reason*, he had felt like he and Billy had been on their way to become friends.

And Steve was in desperate need of a friend.

It almost felt like heartbreak.

Steve took a deep breath in to say something. Anything. He wasn't sure yet what he was going to say, but he *had* to speak. Maybe just something really mean. Maybe he was just going to tell Billy that he was an asshole and that he had deserved the punch to the neck that he seemed to have gotten. If he wanted to make it even meaner, maybe he might tell Billy that he got what he had coming to him, no matter what it was that had happened to Billy. Maybe he hadn't gotten what he had deserved, maybe it was much worse than that, but who cared? It's not like Billy had told Steve what had happened, so Steve didn't know if that was too mean to say.

Which, in that case, when he thought about it, maybe he shouldn't say *that*, then.

Maybe he could just give Billy a kick to the shin and run away?

He'd have to sprint through the house to get away from him, probably. That wasn't going to go unnoticed.

The more Steve thought about what he should say to Billy, the more he could feel anger replacing the sadness and pain he felt about what Billy had said. It was bringing out the worst in him. He was past this. He was *past* this. *Steve, you're past this. No more anger. At least nothing too unnecessary.*

He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, his attention was directed to a creak in the floorboards behind him. He looked up and stared at Billy's face, which gave away absolutely nothing. He was still staring at Steve, looking almost bored about the situation. Steve

looked over his shoulder to look at the source of the sound, making half a turn in the process.

Max had walked into the room, and looked at Steve with a slight sense of worry.

“Hi,” she said softly. She was standing still in the gap of the door. “Am I interrupting?”

She looked over Steve’s shoulder when she asked that question, clearly not directing it at him. He had to fight the urge to look back at Billy to see if his face betrayed anything now. Steve never knew Billy and Max had a bond with each other. Hell, he didn’t even think they’d ever talked to each other. He could hear Billy shake his head behind him. A mumbled “no, Steve was actually just leaving.”

And Steve was tired. *Exhausted*, even. He had wasted his energy on Billy, and on aliens and on some middle schoolers. As much as he tried to ignore it, suddenly the weight that he had been carrying on his shoulders seemed to increase tenfold. He didn’t want to put any more effort into this. He was too worn out to put another word up against Billy. *If he wants to figure it out on his own, let him.*

Steve looked back at Billy one last time, and then shouldered past Max, out of the room.

Notes for the Chapter:

Moved back to my parents' house since we're back in lockdown and exam weeks are coming up, hence why this chapter is late. Next week I won't have classes so I'll be sure to update on time then :) Thank you for reading and also for your patience! Hope everyone is doing well <3

20. Chapter 20

Billy woke up to sounds that he could only begin to describe as happiness, calm and peace. Maybe it was a bit overdramatic of him to think that, but then again, maybe it wasn't. It was not like he'd experienced many mornings wherein he could wake up at any time he wanted. It was not like he'd experienced any mornings wherein he could hear music softly playing from the radio in the kitchen. And it was certainly not like he had experienced mornings wherein he could hear two people gently humming along to whatever was playing on the radio. And maybe, if it wasn't for the fact that he had woken up to these sounds for a couple of days now, he wouldn't have believed that it was real, and that he was actually hearing this. But it was real, and Billy was hearing this, and Hopper and Max really were both in the kitchen, making breakfast and singing along to Here Comes The Sun. Billy could smell the bacon they were frying, and he could feel a few rays of sunlight peeking through the curtains and landing on his skin, and in that moment he knew he was having a taste of what happiness must feel like.

At his own pace, he got out of his bed and pulled on some clothes. Hopper had washed everything they'd brought, and also some of his own old clothes. One bag per person didn't allow for a large variety of clothing, so Max had just enough to wear to school for a week. On the weekends, until she'd have some time to go to the mall with her friends, she would be stuck wearing a pair of Billy's way-too-large-for-her sweatpants and a flannel that used to be Hoppers'. Luckily, she'd packed every pair of jeans that Billy had, so that wasn't a problem for him. There hadn't been much more space for shirts, though, so she'd made the wise decision to bring his favourite leather jacket and a dark red button-up shirt, along with just enough white tank tops to last him a week at school. The more Billy considered how the situation had been when they left, the more his respect for Max grew. She'd really been smart about everything.

He buttoned a dark green flannel that used to be Hopper's, and wore the same hoodie over it that he'd worn yesterday. It was also Hopper's.

When he walked out of his room, Max was already setting the table for three people. Hopper was still in the kitchen, busying himself with what looked to be frying eggs.

"Sleep well?" he asked while poking around in the pan. Billy nodded as he picked up some plates to help Max. "Yeah. Those birds have some lungs on them, though." Max giggled, knowing Billy to be right. Hopper also let out a muffled laugh. "Yeah, they can be somethin'," he agreed. Both Max and Billy had found themselves being woken up by birds every morning around 5 or 6 o'clock. Here in the forest, there was an abundance of sounds all day long. It was weird, but not bad.

As Max set a carton of orange juice on the table, Hopper turned the furnace off and carried the pan through the kitchen, sliding some eggs and bacon onto every plate. Both Max and Billy waited for him to return from putting the pan away until they dug into their food. A comfortable silence fell as they all ate in peace, until Billy's curiosity got the better of him.

"So what happened last night?"

Hopper had just taken a bite, so Max spoke. "Hmm, you didn't miss much. We came to the conclusion that we can't really do anything. If the demogorgons aren't attacking anyone or, like, causing any other trouble, maybe it's just best to let them be." Hopper nodded in silent agreement. Billy took a bite of his own food to mull the information over for a bit, letting another comfortable silence grow as everyone ate. He quickly finished his bite when a thought struck him. "So what about when we go out?" Hopper and Max both turned to him to give him a questioning look. At first he wanted to disregard his own question, but Hopper motioned for him to continue, so he did. "As in, if I drive to a party or back to the cabin from one. Or if Max would go out on her bike at night with her friends. Won't the demogorgons attack people that are out at night?" Hopper nodded once again and swallowed his food, his face turning into a slight frown as he did. "That's a good question," he said lowly, and he proceeded to take a sip of his coffee. "I don't know," he said eventually. "That's a really good point." He leaned back into his chair and stared out the window. Billy took it as a sign that he was considering the issue he'd raised, and slowly took another bite of his own food.

He'd found himself surprised at how quickly he'd gotten more comfortable here in the cabin. The very first day he'd stayed in bed all day, simply because he was too exhausted. He'd felt the urge to get up early and start on chores, but as soon as Hopper had caught him attempting to do so, Billy had found himself being guided right back to bed. As time passed and he had gotten a bit better, Hopper

had let him do whatever he felt he needed to do, and always thanked Billy for anything he did to help out. And, with the three of them all chipping in, it really wasn't much work. Most of the cooking and dish cleaning was a collaboration between everyone. It was mostly Hopper that did the laundry, though Max appeared to enjoy hanging up all the laundry outside for it to dry and bringing it back in. As he hadn't been doing well enough to go back to school already and therefore been staying at the cabin, Billy had spent his time cleaning the house and even doing a bit of garden-keeping. He couldn't really call it full-fledged gardening, but he'd pulled some big branches off the little-traveled forest roads and cleaned some of the overgrowth off of the porch. Hopper had noticed it immediately when he got home after his shift, and thanked him for it. Billy hadn't known how to respond, so he'd ended up just nodding at Hopper, who had deemed that to be a plenty good interaction and smiled before moving into the kitchen to start making dinner. Max seemed comfortable too, becoming just a little more chatty each day. She kept Billy entertained with stories of things that happened at school, and inquired every night about Hopper's cases at work. It was new, and it still felt like a bit of a strange situation, but overall, life at the cabin was good.

"Look, you kids don't have to worry about it, alright?" Hopper spoke up. Billy raised his head to look at Hopper, and from the corner of his eyes he could see that Max was doing the same. "I assume that as long as you're in a car you're faster than those things, so just don't go biking or walking around after dark. I'll take care of the rest. Max, I can pick you up and bring you places. Billy, you've got a car. I can pick you up and take you to places as well, but you can also just drive by yourself if you want. Long as you drive safely, and faster than those demogorgons if they come after you. Alright?"

Billy and Max both nodded. Hopper nodded back at them with a small smile and took another sip of his coffee. "Good."

On the other side of Hawkins, Steve woke up on the bathroom floor in a completely silent house.

What happened?

Everything was hurting. But that could have been expected, seeing that tiled floors weren't exactly comfortable, though his pillows from the day before had still been there.

He slowly pulled himself up to lean against the wall and looked at the small alarm clock above the sink. Ten in the morning. He'd only

gotten a few hours of sleep in, four at most. With a sigh he leaned his head back against the wall, and tried to retrace everything that happened last night.

He'd cried the whole way back from Hopper's place. He drove extra carefully, knowing he wouldn't be able to handle it if anything went wrong during the drive. It took him twice as long to get back to his house as it had taken him to get to the meeting. It was only when he got home, that his sadness had slowly morphed into sheer panic. He'd gone around the house to close the curtains, still in tears. He walked the first round. Then checked all the curtains again. Then picked up the pace to make sure all the windows were closed behind the curtains. By his tenth round through the house, he was in a full sprint. He kept going until he felt like he was going to faint. Until his lungs were burning, and he could almost make himself believe that he could still feel the heat of his own hands on the curtains by the time he reached his beginning point again. Until he'd reached the bathroom and checked the lock nine times. He must have cried for another hour after that. He'd just laid there, feeling sorry for himself. Feeling sorry that he didn't have any friends. That there were probably monsters walking around in his backyard, waiting patiently to attack him and drag him away, the same way they had done with Barb two years ago. Feeling sorry that he was so lonely, and that there was nothing he could do about it. That he was living in this dead and empty house, without anyone there to at least tell him that everything was going to be alright. He didn't even need to feel loved. He didn't even need to feel *liked*. All he needed was someone to tell him that this would be resolved and all the upside down issues would be gone for good and he could finally live at least without fear of being eaten alive by aliens.

But no one was there. So he'd cried. He'd cried until eventually, when the first glimpse of the sun shone through his window and he heard the beginnings of the birdsong that implied the beginning of the day, he fell asleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm writing again and then I checked this work and I had this chapter queued? I'm gonna post it without proofreading it since I seem to have deemed this

worthy of being uploaded in the past. And also because I really want to update this fic since I really kept everyone waiting. Sorry about that, life has been a mess since the pandemic and starting university, but I'm getting a grip on it. I'm writing again, but the updates may be slow since there's a chance that I'll be moving to the other side of the world in a few months. We'll see. Until then, I still am rooting for a Billy comeback in the upcoming season and I will also keep on writing because honestly I have such a good outline for this story that it would be a shame to not finish it.

Thank you to everyone who is still reading and left me some comments on my last post with the update, it really means a lot to me that you're still here after that break and that you'd wait until I'm back to post. I'm really, really thankful for that. I'll delete that update chapter since it's messing up my chapter order but rest assured that I'm saving your comments so that I can look back at them later :) Once again thank you and sorry for the short chapter, just bear with me for a bit while I get back into the groove. Have some fluff to enjoy :)